Emerging technologies offer educational possibilities for enhancing the pedagogical development of distance education courses delivered through the Internet. In this paper, I will discuss some ways that integrated multimedia has been used to strengthen the teaching and learning of a virtual education course — “Ethnic Arts Online.” From the beginning development of the Ethnic Arts Online course, it was important that it meet the same high academic and pedagogical goals of the face-to-face course. Over the past few years, I have collected data from these courses and relationally analyzed them with regards to content robustness and academic rigor. Course data was available from both courses primarily through student writings and interactions. From my research and examination of electronic educational computing courses, I believe that virtual teaching and learning can be academically challenging and the content contextually rich. I support a social constructivist educational position guided by critical inquiry about the complexities of life-centered issues, exploration of meanings and values of social, historical, and cultural contextual conditions, and dialogue about multiple and divergent interpretations. Below I briefly introduce the Ethnic Arts Online course and some pedagogical aspects of integrated multimedia, critical inquiry, intercultural communication spaces, and student self-directed learning. Woven within this review are suggestions for developing and practicing social constructivist educational pedagogy.

Ethnic Arts Online Course

“Ethnic Arts: A Means of Intercultural Communication,” (Ethnic Arts) is an undergraduate course offered at The Ohio State University (OSU). Six or more sections of the course are offered each quarter through the Department of Art Education. Ethnic Arts satisfies three OSU undergraduate General Education Curriculum requirements: arts and humanities, social and cultural diversity, and second level writing. Course content is thematically organized to examine a comprehensive range of artists, artwork, and critical writing in the art worlds from diverse ethnic cultures in North America. Ethnic Arts enrolls approximately 500 students each year from a broad spectrum of the university's student population (e.g., African American, Asian American, Chicano/a, Latino/a, Puerto Rican, Korean, Malaysian, Chinese, Indian American [India], Somalian, Mexican American, Honduran, European American, Native American, etc.). One section of the distance education course (Ethnic Arts Online) has been offered over the Internet each year since the 2000 spring quarter. Ethnic Arts Online combines course management aspects of WebCT within an HTML set of frames, along with animation, and multimedia authoring features of Apple QuickTime, Flash, and RealPlayer. Students enrolled in this online version of the course meet only in a virtual community.

A distinctive feature of the Ethnic Arts course is that students interview local artists from various ethnic groups and within the student’s local community. In the face-to-face course, many of the students bring objects, images, and video in to the classroom to share with their classmates. They document the artist’s sense of ethnicity and cultural identity in relationship with their art-making processes. So in order to provide a similar rich context for distance education students, it was desirable to have intercultural communication spaces available for students to post visual, audio, and textual information via the Internet.

Social Constructivist Pedagogy

The Ethnic Arts Online Web site’s interface was developed with a “pedagogical design” to enhance academic rigor and content robustness. The pedagogical design infused aspects of integrated multimedia, critical inquiry, intercultural communication spaces, and self-directed learning that were strongly influenced by a social constructivist educational philosophy. The aim was to promote a sense of initiative, creativity, collaboration, and responsibility among students and the instructor.

In “Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom,” Palloff and Pratt (1999) suggested that the importance of socializing begins with interactions among students themselves, between faculty and students, and with collaboration in learning that results from these
studying the ideas and issues. Students also learn that there can be multiple processes of educational and ethnographic critically examined through various forms of communication spaces. Every “critical” inquiry is a continual process of identifying and posing problems, asking questions and questioning of knowledge. However, students are asked to do more than just inquire about the “things” that people make special thoughts and actions about an idea, issue, or problem so as to increase one’s understanding of a particular solution or body shared meanings of visual forms of symbolic culture. In the course, inquiry is simply defined as to direct ones immediate complex sets of lived events, contextual relationships, and how social issues contribute to the production, divergence, and representations, aesthetics, and culture. Another pedagogical aspect of the course was to facilitate student research of Inquiry is used to conduct ethnographic research about ethnicity, identity, representation, and visual culture. Course assignments provide ways for students to: share common interests and beliefs; discuss differences of interpretations; work alone and collaboratively on assignments; reflect on and critically think about the ideas and issues in relationship to themselves and within society; and make a long-term commitments to their own, one another's, and/or the group’s understanding of the online learning community. Students represent their research through formal and informal dialogue, structured and semi-structured questions generated by the instructor and student group leaders, and though written assignments. They are expected to conduct ethnographic research in their own communities, interviewing people about their “sense of peoplehood” or ethnicity and social alliances. This information is then posted on the course Web site and critically examined through various forms of communication spaces.

Integrated Multimedia

The Ethnic Arts Online course incorporates many different forms of emerging technologies including Internet and Web-based computer-mediated communication, WebCT course management software, streaming audio and video, and virtual reality QuickTime movies. Macromedia Flash was used to organize content, multimedia, and course management applications within a set of html frames. In addition, the course interface was visually arranged to guide students in recognizing and reinforcing their critical inquiry processes during their virtual experiences.

The use of emerging technologies in the Ethnic Arts Online course draws from various forms of integrated multimedia, while creating a high expectation level for learning, it also facilitates self-directed inquiry and provides an environment conducive to collaboration among learners and the instructor. These resources have the potential to enable students to participate in a learning environment, inquire and communicate about ideas and issues, and assess their learning performance. The following overviews some of these resources:

1. Course Readings: online articles about course ideas.
2. Contexts: lectures, audio and video materials prepared for students to view online. Audio and video are streamed and can be accessed from this resources link in the weekly assignment section. RealPlayer Basic must be installed in order to access this material.
3. Unit Galleries: examples of past student papers written about selected artists, art forms or conditions of change associated with artistic practice.
4. Student Work: examples of past student work that addresses the concepts being studied at this time in the course.
5. Links: Internet sites that address the ideas, issues, or related course information.
6. Virtual Objects and Environments (QTVR): QuickTime virtual reality files are available for some assignments. The QuickTime plug-in must be installed on the student's Internet browser to access these resources.

Critical Inquiry

Students in the Ethnic Arts Online course are required to critically examine the interconnectedness of everyday representations, aesthetics, and culture. Another pedagogical aspect of the course was to facilitate student research of complex sets of lived events, contextual relationships, and how social issues contribute to the production, divergence, and shared meanings of visual forms of symbolic culture. In the course, inquiry is simply defined as to direct ones immediate thoughts and actions about an idea, issue, or problem so as to increase one’s understanding of a particular solution or body of knowledge. However, students are asked to do more than just inquire about the “things” that people make special everyday. “Critical” inquiry is a continual process of identifying and posing problems, asking questions and questioning the validity of the questions asked. It entails the selection of inquiry processes to solve the problem or that are relevant to studying the ideas and issues. Students also learn that there can be multiple processes of educational and ethnographic inquiry.

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Intercultural Communication Spaces

Another goal of the course is to facilitate intercultural communication by building a supportive virtual community of online learning. This is achieved by clearly defining how technology can be used appropriately to complete assignments successfully. Our online course policy indicates a clear code of conduct for student participation in this virtual educational learning community. Technology is also used to create distinctive gathering places for group conversations and to encourage positive student leadership from within. Therefore to support student involvement and interaction, the Ethnic Arts Online course attempts to create a safe and dynamic virtual learning community. These kinds of intercultural communication spaces are becoming much easier with the aid of emerging technologies that allow for the design, production, administration, and maintenance of online messaging systems.

Perhaps an example would be helpful to illustrate some of these points. In the first assignment students introduce themselves to a partner in order to facilitate community building among class members. They share these interviews online (interviews are an important aspect of ethnographic inquiry. Additionally, students are required to conduct an interview with a local artist and use the data in writing their major papers for the course). These introductions serve several purposes for creating an online community including: building positive social relationships among class members, identifying common interests, and limiting the online group size to only a few people at the beginning of their online process of communication. Group collaboration is used throughout the course. As the quarter progresses, students participate in several varying group sizes of 2-6 members. Each member is scheduled to take an active role as a group leader for several activities, such as posing questions about the course readings, facilitating group schedules and activities, and helping fellow students probe life-centered issues of diversity, difference, ethnicity, representation, and aesthetics, as related to course content. Student involvement and interaction are mediated through the following synchronous and asynchronous computer messaging systems, or as I have referred to them in this paper, intercultural communication spaces (e.g., email, listserv, threaded discussion forum, chat room, and an electronic student portfolio).

1. Chat Rooms: Chat room conversations happen in real time. Therefore, course members are expected to only use the chat rooms in small group assignments. In order to log-on at the same time, group members make prior arrangements for a common time to have their chats.
2. E-mail: There are two different forms of e-mail that we use in this course, individual email and a listserv. Students are enrolled in the listserv and any message they send to the “LIST” automatically goes to all of the class members. They are instructed to use the listserv for general correspondence between themselves, classmates, and the instructor. If they have personal business or are asked to send an individual email, this is achieved by sending the e-mail to the individual’s email address. Some assignments are sent directly to the instructor.
3. Discussion Forum: The Discussion Forum is like a listserv with the exception that it is posted and maintained on the World Wide Web. Students use a browser (Navigator or Internet Explorer, not their email application) to access the Discussion Forums. One forum is created for each week of class during the quarter. The discussion forums allow course members to communicate with each other and to organize their conversations in one location on the Internet.
4. ePortfolios: The electronic portfolio is a set of Internet web pages that consist of student papers with supportive images. The administration and forms are generated using Practical Extraction and Report Language (PERL). Students use this communication space to create their own online web pages during week 6, 7, and 8. In addition to text, these pages also contain digital images taken by students using a camera and transferred to a CDROM by a photo-processing store, digital camera, or captured from a scanner. Images are saved in the JGP format, sized no larger than 400 x 400 pixels @ 72 dpi. The images are then sent using the portfolio common gateway interface (CGI) form. The eportfolio Web pages are also used during the final group assignments during week 10 and 11. After capturing information digitally, students post their ethnographic research in this eportfolio area, which is archived to preserve their inquiry for future classes.

The creation of computer-mediated messaging systems is crucial to developing dynamic virtual intercultural communication spaces in distance. The integration of emerging technologies within online virtual education can offer students a less threatening way to become active participants in creating and making sense of visual culture. Virtual education allows students to use their time to explore, examine, reflect, and then write their interpretations through computer-mediated messaging systems. For many students, these virtual communication spaces help them feel more at easy. It provides them greater control over expressing their ideas with peers. Students in face-to-face classroom situations do not always experience this “comfort zone.” For example, language differences can create miscommunications and interpretation difficulties for “international” students. Some students express that virtual intercultural communication spaces offer them a greater degree of security and comfort. It is important to note that the
The development of online learning communities should be continually examined for issues of conflict and the negotiation of divergent and shared values. The Ethnic Arts Online course is organized to facilitate interactions and collaboration among learners and the instructor. An adage we sometimes adopt in the course is that we should “agree to disagree” about some issues.

Self-Directed Learning

The course is also structured to create a self-directed learning environment for inquiry, communication, experimentation, and problem solving of ideas and issues. Self-directed learning is based on research that learners can actively create knowledge and meaning through direct experiences, reflection, manipulation, and critical inquiry of ideas in everyday life. Students are encouraged and required to participate in course activities and assist others with reflecting on and assessing the accuracy and application of their ideas. Collaboration, shared goals, and group work are powerful forces in this learning process as are group activities, simulations, and the use of open-ended questions.

Criteria for all assignments are clearly represented and available online for students. Criteria are listed in different ways to address the diversity of different learning styles. The instructor reviews and grades all assignments, assesses the student's achievement and performance, as well as, helps students clarify assignment criteria and interacts with them as they pursue their research. The instructor serves as a facilitator to the learning process by setting up: the use of collaborative assignments, forums for active discussions, and multimedia to aid in the development of critical inquiry and research skills. Students are directly responsible for exploring ways to successfully deliberate and engage in this form of educational practice.

After students describe, reflect on, and assess their own learning performances, they are required to analyze the information they produce in relationship to other perspectives associated with the idea or topic. These culminating experiences are represented in their eportfolio presentations. Because students know that they are allowed to rewrite and resubmit assignments, they typically feel comfortable taking risks and their assumptions sometimes lead to incorrect choices. However, these risks more often lead to the generation of greater in-depth information. Student eportfolios and assessment often reflect adjusts to their interpretations learned through self-directed, peer reviewed, and critical inquiry methods.

Summary

Ethnic Arts Online requires students to effectively demonstrate achievement and performance with acquired knowledge in the course content areas. Student are not asked to recall or “plug in” what they learned. Instead, they must apply their knowledge with consideration of contemporary contextual societal conditions acquired through their own inquiry. Students are expected to achieve greater than the required minimal levels of participation. They must conduct research, which includes: collaborating with others; writing, revising and discussing papers; engaging in oral analysis of course ideas within the contexts of contemporary society; and discussing intercultural similarities and differences of opinions and interpretations. In conclusion, I believe that critical inquiry and integrated multimedia are some of the ways to strengthen the pedagogy of virtual education. Ultimately, the over-arching premise of the Ethnic Arts Online course has been to develop an online community that can support the needs of many different learning styles, improve student performances and instructional practices. This is a very large task and one that will need to be continually addressed in order to achieve success. Nevertheless, the purpose of this social constructivist approach is to support students not just being respondent to standardized curriculum knowledge or reflective of prior experiences. Virtual education and pedagogy should help students to seek out new knowledge, to empower themselves and others, and to be forward-looking in their life-long learning.

References


**Biographical Sketch**

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