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Integrating telecollaboration into the language classroom – what goes on where?

INTRODUCTION
Most telecollaboration projects take place within a blended environment that includes a classroom and an on-line component, with both elements intimately connected. However most studies and articles tend to focus on the nature of the on-line interactions and on the factors that contribute to successful or failed communication, whether it takes place via email, discussion forums, video-conferencing or a combination of those. Not much has been written about what role the classroom might specifically play in helping students develop overall intercultural competence. That part of the equation often stays hidden and out of view for a very simple reason: the on-line discussions, by virtue of being archived and accessible to anyone, are often the only “public face” and the only visible component of such projects.

The main goal of this chapter is to bring to the surface those elements of classroom work\(^1\) that we believe play a unique and crucial role in ensuring that students get the greatest benefit from those exchanges. We focus on the interplay between on-line and classroom work, showing how both components dovetail to create a coherent whole, each illuminating and informing the other in order to advance the process of intercultural understanding.

The basis for our remarks will be Cultura, an intercultural web project designed at MIT, which involves students in two language classes - one in France and one in the US\(^2\). We will share the lessons we have learnt over the last ten years of using and implementing Cultura in an intermediate French language class at MIT.

The first part of the chapter provides an overview of Cultura, its goal, approach as well as the basic set-up and methodology. The second details the content of the website and the materials used, as well as the main characteristics of the on-line forums, which are at the core of this intercultural project. The third part describes the multiple ways in which we work with the content, including the tasks done by students outside of class and the subsequent in-class activities that will bring to light the ways in which classroom work can help students both reflect upon and expand their knowledge. In the final part, we highlight the new pedagogies that are generated by this novel hybrid environment - both in terms of the learner’s and teacher’s roles.

I CULTURA: A BASIC DESCRIPTION

1. Background

Cultura was developed at MIT in 1997\(^3\), thanks to an initial 3-year grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities \(^4\). It was designed to develop a new kind of course within an

\(^1\) we are focusing only on what happens in the MIT classroom, since we don’t exactly know what goes on in the partner’s classroom. The classroom activities do not have to match in both sets of classes, since the level of students as well as the teacher’s style can be totally different.

\(^2\) Cultura was developed at MIT and it has since been adopted and adapted by a number of universities, in other languages, in the US and abroad

\(^3\) by a team of three MIT French Faculty, Gilberte Furstenberg, Sabine Levet and Shoggy Waryn.

\(^4\) N.E.H. is a federal agency dedicated to supporting research and education in the humanities.
intermediate French language class - with a focus on the development of intercultural understanding. Since 1997, Cultura has been adopted by several universities in the US and adapted in varying degrees to a number of other languages, with classes in the US being connected to classes in China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Philippines, Russia, Samoa, Spain, and the number is constantly growing.

Our desire to make the development of intercultural understanding the focus of the language class came out of the simple observation that our students were increasingly going to work and interact with people from other cultures. This led us to realize that, as language teachers - by virtue of our teaching both language and culture - we could and needed to play a large role in the overall educational task of preparing our students to become better citizens of the world. The Modern Language Association recognized in its May 2007 report the importance of developing students “translingual and transcultural competence” adding that “not surprisingly, ‘the need to understand other cultures and languages’ is one of five imperative needs to which higher education must respond in the next ten years if it is to remain relevant”.

That very goal has long been recognized by the Council of Europe which made 2008 the “Year of the Intercultural Dialogue” and redefined the role of the language teacher in the following terms: “Language teaching is not just a professional skill but a social activity of major significance in the contemporary world.”

This is the context in which Cultura situates itself.

2. Goals

Our goal was to explore ways in which the Internet and its on-line communication tools could help develop students’ intercultural skills. Our previous experience in developing several technology-based applications had made us quickly aware of the perfect synergy between the field of inter-cultural communication (which implies encounters between people) and the Internet (which facilitates such encounters) and this was an avenue we wanted to pursue.

Cultura seeks, in particular, to help students develop, within a language class an in-depth understanding of the attitudes, concepts, values and beliefs imbedded in another culture. Those aspects of culture being essentially invisible - Edward Hall calls culture “the silent language” and “the hidden dimension” - our challenge was to make the “invisible” visible? To make something that is not easily reachable accessible.

A tool and an approach were needed. The tools, simply, are the on-line discussion forums tools (we will focus on them later). The approach is simply a comparative one.

3. Approach

5 we have implemented Cultura in an intermediate language class, which is the lowest level at which it can be used, in our opinion, and it certainly can be successfully implemented in more advanced language/culture classes or classes that prepare students to go abroad.
6 quoting Daniel Yankelovich, the renowned social scientist
7 http://www.mla.org/flreport
9 The interactive fiction A la Rencontre de Philippe, published by CLE Int. in Paris and the interactive documentary, Dans un Quartier de Paris, published by Yale University Press
10 It is also important to note that the whole course is built around Cultura.
11 The Hidden Dimension and The Silent Language, titles of books by Edward T. Hall, were first published in 1959 and 1969 respectively.
The comparative approach seems a particularly apt one, as it enables similarities and differences between cultures to easily emerge. As Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian theorist wrote: “A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning […] It is only in the eyes of ANOTHER culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly […]”

We had also seen the promise of the juxtaposition process when we developed the multimedia documentary *Dans un Quartier de Paris.* What *Cultura* provides is a two-layered approach, with students on both sides first comparing a variety of similar materials originating from American and French cultures - what Julie Belz calls ‘parallel texts’ and then entering into dialogs with their foreign partners about these “texts” in order to try and understand these differences, with the ultimate goal of getting an insider’s view of the other culture. As Michael Byram notes, if students are going to become “intercultural speakers”, it is necessary they exhibit a "willingness to suspend belief in one’s own meanings and behaviors, and to analyze them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging.” This is exactly the approach *Cultura* tries to implement.

4. The set-up

In this a hybrid environment, two classes in two different countries/cultures - ideally classes with converging goals and similar make-ups - work and interact together for the duration of a semester (or for the length of time their common calendars will permit)

However, simply connecting students does not automatically develop intercultural understanding. That understanding needs to be scaffolded, constructed and based upon solid content that will allow students to interact with each other on substantial issues as well as a sound methodology that will accompany them through that gradual process. This is what *Cultura* provides.

This process requires the close involvement and monitoring of two teachers (one on each side) who set up a common calendar, develop the questionnaires and tasks and communicate throughout the exchange to make sure the two groups follow the same pace.

5. The *Cultura* website and the overall methodology

One of our main tenets is that knowledge and understanding of another culture cannot be viewed as a simple accumulation of facts, but is the result of a dynamic, interactive process that students gradually construct, together with their foreign partners. We therefore designed the website as a kind of road map which students would follow as they journey together through the other cultural land.

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13 In that CD-ROM, students explore a Paris “quartier” in its many dimensions and have the ability to bring together and associate diverse segments, which gives them access to the hidden/underlying layers of culture (the meaning of words/the importance of perspectives) and allows them to gradually construct a deeper understanding of that all cultural space.
14 http://llt.msu.edu/vol6num1/belz/default.html
15 “speaker” in the broad sense of the word, which includes the intercultural reader.
17 two language classes with students of similar ages and from comparable schools.
18 we suggest a minimum of six weeks
This is the place where students meet - at the “junction” of the Pont Neuf and the Brooklyn Bridge. Each point on the “itinerary” can be viewed as a “stop” in a collective journey, with students accessing, along their way, different kinds of “texts”. These constitute separate units or modules that can be analyzed and compared in order to bring students to “possess other eyes, to look at the universe through the eyes of others”\(^\text{19}\), as Marcel Proust wrote.

At the heart of the website - and the journey - are the forums where students exchange their views on the all the materials they find as they move along, all at the same pace. More detailed information on the overall process and the role and characteristics of the forums can be found later in this chapter.

II THE CONTENT AND FORUMS OF CULTURA

1. The content

It constitutes the backbone of the students’ learning as well as the needed structure around which students will gradually and progressively build their knowledge and understanding. Content is crucial, as it provides the basis for the on-line exchanges, giving them meaning and substance. More often than not, conversations between students in forum set-ups are nothing more than updated versions of pen pal exchanges and are often limited to an exchange of information about what food or music

\(^{19}\) from La Prisonnière, A la recherche du Temps perdu, Gallimard, Paris 1989. p. 87
students like or what activities they enjoy doing during their free time. In order to ensure meaningful intercultural conversations, topics need to be carefully selected in terms of their potential for generating rich debates and allowing multiple perspectives. This is the basis on which our materials were selected.

The content of Cultura - which is to be found on the shared website - includes the following:

**a. the questionnaires**

They constitute the first stage of the intercultural journey. There are two sets of them, one in English and one in French (each questionnaire being the mirror image of the other), and have been designed by both instructors, then posted on line. Students answer them in their own “native” language, anonymously and at one sitting, at the very beginning of the term. They include:

- a word association questionnaire (where students are asked to make associations to such words as family, work, success, freedom, individualism)
- a sentence completion questionnaire (where students complete sentences such as: a “good” neighbor, a “good” boss, a “good” parent)
- a hypothetical situations questionnaire (where students write what they would think, say or do if they, for instance, see a mother in a supermarket slap her child, see a student cheating at an exam, or hear people talk aloud during a movie)

These questions can be changed from semester to semester.

The answers to those questionnaires (with the single words coming first) form the entry point into both cultures.

**b. other materials**

Even though the questionnaires may be the best-known feature of Cultura, they are by no means the only set of materials that students analyze and compare. The following modules are very much part and parcel of the common journey, and are meant to diversify and gradually expand the students’ cultural investigations. They include:

**Data**

This module gives students access to a number of web sites containing national American and French statistics as well as national surveys about any topic related to French society. Those sites provide students with the ability to investigate further any topic they have become particularly interested in while analyzing the questionnaires and discussing them with their foreign partners (whether it is family, religion, work, etc.).

**Films**

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20 They are not always literal translations. We chose to translate “un enfant bien élevé” by “a well-behaved child”. Even though these are obviously not literal translations, we chose to focus on equivalent expressions that are commonly used in each culture.

21 Since there are foreign students on both sides, we mean the language of the countries in which the classes are located.

22 These questionnaires have all been designed to fathom: (1) the meaning behind some key concepts (individualism/success) and basic aspects of everyday life (family/work/religion, etc.); (2) what might be viewed as “ideal” types of relationships with different people and what their roles are perceived to be (a “good” parent, boss, neighbor, etc.), (3) different kinds of potentially conflicting situations in different contexts and with a variety of people (strangers/friends/classmates) to try and highlight what might guide people’s attitudes and values.
Many French films having been turned into American ones, a comparison of the original French films with their American remakes provides yet another angle of observation of both cultures. The focus for students is to first identify what has changed in the American version as compared to the original (what elements have been eliminated, added, modified?) and then to reflect on what those differences may reveal about the underlying cultures. The comparison includes not only a look at the different cultural attitudes as portrayed by the characters or reflected by the storyline, but an analysis of filmic elements, such as the role of music and light for instance, or the characteristics of Hollywood films, or even assumed notions about the public at which the two films are geared.

**Newsstand**

Students can compare, for instance, the front page of the online version of *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* for any given day and see how the news are organized, what news are given more prominence, and what can be inferred about each culture. Readers’ comments (reactions by French readers of *Le Monde*, for instance, to an American event or by American readers of *The New York Times* about a French event) can also be very revealing and bear very fruitful comparisons, with students again exchanging their discoveries with their transatlantic partners.

**Library**

It includes a series of excerpts from a variety of primary sources as well as texts from different disciplines (history, literature, sociology) written by experts about the “other” country and culture. Those texts are purposefully made available at the “end” of the journey. It may initially seem a bit odd: indeed, in a typical course that focuses on culture, students are usually given texts to read which, in turn, form the basis of their knowledge. In this case, however, since students themselves gradually build their knowledge, it seemed fit to give those texts toward the “end”, as they may serve as validation by experts of what the students may already have discovered by themselves or offer yet other and new perspectives.

**Images**

This module (which can be used at any time but which we use at the end of the term) is different from the others because the content is provided by the student themselves. The concept behind *Images* is to allow students to illustrate their respective cultural reality and exchange views about them via still and videos.

All the different materials above form the basis of the intercultural conversations between the students and lead them to constantly revise their views, question them, expand them, and refine them in the light of the new materials and new perspectives they encounter. At the “end” of their collective journey, students are not meant to come to any definitive statement about the other culture, but the dialogues they have embarked on with their foreign partners will hopefully have sowed the seeds of a lifetime exploration.

2. The on-line forums
   a. characteristics

They are at the heart of the discovery process. In the forums, students interact with their online partners about every single material they have analyzed and compared. The *Cultura* forums present the following characteristics:

- They are *asynchronous*. Asynchronicity, initially imposed by time differences, proved to be a big asset, as students are thus able to write in a more deliberate and reflective manner. They write in the forums on their own time and outside of class only but, as will be shown later, the content of the discussions is then brought back into class and examined in detail in group.
- They are *multiple*. A forum is attached to each item in the questionnaires (there is a forum for each word, each sentence, and each situation) and many concurrent forums are taking place, with
students choosing which words, sentence or situation they want to discuss. Since each is labeled separately, there is a clear focus for each one. As additional modules such as data, films or newsstand, are activated during any given exchange, new forums are created for each new module. Forums are also added when current events in either country warrant it. This was the case with the September 11 events, with presidential elections or the youth demonstrations in following the projected CPE\textsuperscript{23} bill, for instance.

- They are **collective** and open to the whole class (students do not pick specific partners). All students share in a conversation that gradually unfolds, with each student adding his or her own viewpoint and reacting to earlier statements made either by the foreign students or their own classmates.
- They are **led entirely by the students and instructors never interfere**. The forums being anchored to a specific topic - to a single word or a phrase (from the questionnaires), a particular survey (from the data module) or an observation about one aspect of the films - they have a natural starting point but the students’ discussions evolve in whatever direction they choose. One never knows what turns the conversations will take and, of course, they differ from one semester to the other.

In the context of a hybrid environment, it was deemed unnecessary and even counter-productive for teachers to interfere in the forums. Should a problem in communication arise, it could be talked about and dealt with in the classroom. We also observed that students themselves naturally tend to either self regulate or to “censor” either as an individual or a group. In a Fall 08 discussion forum, for instance, where a French student, was writing in capital letters, an MIT student spontaneously wrote: “Marquis, just for your information, general online etiquette in America is that one types in all capitals if you are yelling or angry. I don’t think this was the case for you, though. Just a warning, so that you don’t get misinterpreted later”. When issues arise, they can be dealt with and debated in the classroom.

- The forums (with just one exception\textsuperscript{24}) are **written in the students “native”\textsuperscript{25} language.** This particular feature is often controversial and misunderstood by language teachers and therefore requires an explanation.

The advantages of having students **write** in their “native” language are multiple: there is no linguistic dominance by any person or any group and everyone is on an equal footing. Students are not limited by their linguistic abilities but can make complex and nuanced observations and fully explain their own culture to the other. This was deemed the best way to reach our stated goal, which is to try and access the core layers of the culture. In the process, students **read** completely authentic French or English, and the “other” language becomes a rich, inexhaustible resource when the students’ write their own essays or speak in class.

**Function of the forums**

This is where students exchange their perspectives and try to understand the other point of view in a constant and reciprocal process of inquiry. They share their observations, ask and respond to questions, make hypotheses, raise paradoxes and contradictions and revisit issues, creating along the way a web of connections between different types of materials while providing each other with a wealth of cultural information, in search of more expanded and in-depth understanding of the other culture.

\textsuperscript{23} The CPE (or Contrat Première Embauche [First Employment Contract] was a new form of employment contract pushed in spring 2006 by Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. This contract was violently opposed by the French youth, because it would have made it easier for the employer to fire employees. The demonstrations forced the French Government to withdraw the bill.

\textsuperscript{24} we occasionally open a forum entitled “Coffee break/pause café” in which students can communicate about any topic and in the target language, if they choose to do so

\textsuperscript{25} or more specifically, the language of the countries in which the classes are located, since there are foreign students on both sides.
In the examples below - all taken from the Fall semester of 200826 unless otherwise indicated - the students’ comments have been separated into discreet categories, but it is important to keep in mind that those categories always naturally merge.

In the forums, students:

- **share their observations and express their reactions** to the documents they have just analyzed. After comparing the answers to the questionnaires, for instance, students will write “I noticed that”, “I observed that”, “I too observed, however”, “I was surprised to see”, “I was intrigued by”, “What was interesting to me was that”...

In their initial conversations, students spontaneously attempt to sort out the origins of their differences: are they culturally imbedded? or are they due to external factors such as the influence of Hollywood and the media, or even the current political climate.

Students often discuss the context in which they envision themselves when responding to the questionnaires and discuss how much it may have influenced their individual answers. Regarding “neighbors/voisins”, for instance, they became quickly aware that their responses were greatly influenced by the context they were thinking of, when answering the questionnaire, whether it was neighbors in a city or in the (American) suburbs or on campus, etc..

Students spontaneously raise the issue of whether the differences in their answers might also originate from the different make-ups of their respective schools. In a discussion on the associations School/Ecole, one student wrote “In the United States, the way you view school often depends on what kind of school you attend. Because MIT is different from state schools, our responses probably differ considerably from students at other American Universities”. Another student mused: “While we tend to focus on science and technology, your school is more humanity-oriented. Do you think this accounts for the difference?”, thus bringing to the surface the all important notion of context.

Like anthropologists, students constantly try to extrapolate what might be the fundamental cultural difference between the French and Americans. In that same discussion on School/Ecole, one student wrote: What was interesting was that the American students thought of things more specifically associated with our school (with MIT) and our personal experience with school, whereas the French students thought of more general things”, which generated a discussion about whether this could be viewed as “typical” American and French cultural traits and could be evidenced in other contexts.

- **Students ask each other questions and respond to their partners’ queries**, often contrasting the foreign cultural reality with their own. Questions and responses are crucial in ensuring a real dialogue and making sure that the conversations are not just a series of individual monologues and parallel comments. We see them as the key to a successful intercultural on-line discussion.

In a forum based on the answers to the phrase “a good neighbor/un bon voisin”, where students had noticed a preponderance of words such as “friendly” and “helpful” on the American side, and a frequent use by the French students of such words as “bruyant” (noisy), “bruyants” (noisy), or “distant”), Ellie, an MIT student wrote: “After viewing the responses of the French students, it appears that in France, a good neighbor is simply one that respects your privacy and is discrete [sic]. I guess my question is: why is there not much interaction between neighbors in France? I feel like interacting with your neighbors is just another opportunity to make good friends”

To which, Catherine, a French student responded: “Les Français sont souvent méfiants vis à vis de leurs voisins. Très souvent, les jardins mitoyens sont séparés par des murs ou des haies suffisamment hautes pour qu’on ne puisse pas être vu. Ne pas être vu est d’ailleurs une obsession chez beaucoup de Français.” [The French are often

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26 This exchange was done between students taking a third semester French class at MIT and students taking English at the Université of Lille-3, under the supervision of Professor Annick Rivens.
distrustful of their neighbors. Very often their adjoining yards are separated by a wall or a hedge that is high enough so that they can’t be seen. Not to be seen is actually an obsession for the French - a remark which includes a wealth of related cultural information.

Some French students find the portrait painted by the American students a bit too idyllic, “A vous lire,” writes Jimmy, a French student, “on se croirait vraiment au paradis. Est ce vraiment ainsi, avec un voisin amical, sympa, qui vient chez vous voir les matchs de sport une bière à la main et promène le chien/tond la pelouse en même temps? N’est ce pas un peu idyllique? - a remark which reveals a certain dose of skepticism, a well-known French trait, which students discover in the process. [You make it sound like paradise. Are neighbors really that friendly, and nice, and do they come to your place to watch a game on TV with a beer in hand and also walk your dog or mow your lawn? Isn’t this a bit idyllic a picture?]

• Students constantly make and check hypotheses. In a discussion based on the word “individualism/individualisme”, where they all noticed a stark difference between the associations made by the American students (freedom, independence, creativity, confidence) and the French ones (égoïsme, égoïsme, méfiance [mistrust], solitude), Jason, an MIT student, wrote: “I believe that this is a function of a rather constitutional difference between the two nations. While America is a capitalistic nation, in which entrepreneurship and the notion of "being your own boss" are highly advertised ideals, France is a socialistic society, in which decisions are made in the best interest of the country in which its citizens operate under the ideal of "all of one, and one for all" […] How do you feel about what I’ve said? Do you agree with what I claim to be the origin of our separation in thought”

Students base their hypotheses on more than a single document. In the Spring 2006 exchange between MIT students and students at Polytechnique, Hashem, an MIT student from Jordan, wrote: "One major difference that I found between the two cultures is the issue of social norms. I felt like there was greater rigidity in the French culture on what is acceptable and what isn’t when compared to the US. Do you feel like this is true based on what’s been said in the forums and the questionnaires? I feel like in France, these social norms are much more defined and agreed upon by the people.”.

To which Guillaume, a French student, responded, pointing out an interesting paradox in French society, namely the extreme codification of the rules governing relations between people but a great flexibility in a way they are applied.

"Salut Hashem, En ce qui concerne les conventions sociales, il faut savoir qu’ici les règles du "savoir-vivre" sont certes très codifiées et parfois complexes mais leur mise en application est très flexible. Il n’est pas réellement considéré comme inacceptable de ne pas respecter toutes les règles, bien au contraire : toute la subtilité des relations consiste à choisir la bonne mesure de politesse […] [“With regard to “social conventions”, one has to understand that while the rules here of “knowing how to get along” are, to be sure, very codified and occasionally complex, in practice they are very flexible. It is not really considered unacceptable not to respect all the rules; to the contrary: all the subtlety of social relations lies in trying to find the right level of politeness.”]

Not all questions are answered. We also noticed that American students tend to ask more questions than the French student (a cultural trait in itself?), but the same topics often tend to be picked up later in another context.

Students make spontaneous connections from one document to another (from one set of questionnaires to another, or from one context to another), trying to reconcile what they see as contradictions. In a discussion about what is viewed as “a good neighbor/un bon voisin”, Briana, an MIT student, referring back to a discussion about what constitutes a “rude person/une personne impolie” in the two cultures, asks: “In the "Rude Person", many Lille 3 students indicated that it is impolite not to say hello. How is it that strangers are expected to greet each other but neighbors do not socialize?”

In another exchange27, after reading an excerpt from Polly Platt’s book28 on the concept of politeness in France, an MIT student asked: […] I’m surprised politeness is claimed to be the most important word in the

27 at the end of the Spring 2001 term
French language. Is it really important to the French to be polite to strangers? The commonest complaint I’ve heard about French people is that they are sarcastic and rude. I’ve witnessed a lot of the sarcasm in the course of this forum and a little bit of the rudeness. I’m having a little trouble relating French politeness and their sharp sarcasm. Could someone help me out?"

The French often try to help out. In another forum based on the word “family/famille”, Kezia, an MIT student, asked, in reaction to a comment by a French student who had written that the French tend to be “plus pudiques” [more modest] in their way of expressing feelings of love: “Interesting comment, Gaelle. I always thought that the French were more open about their emotions. The French always seem to be kissing and hugging each other. […] Why do you say the French are more discreet?”. This prompted the following response from Gaelle: Les Français sont plus pudiques quant à leurs sentiments, le fait de les clamer haut et fort, mais il est fréquent d’apercevoir des couples s’embrasser dans la rue [..], [The French are more modest about their feelings, in terms of expressing them loud and clear, but it is indeed common to see couples kissing in the street], making it clear that there are different ways of expressing emotions: verbalizing them (the American way) vs showing them (the French way).

The end goal of these on-line discussions is not to create a consensus among all students but rather to be a forum where issues are constantly raised and debated at every turn. They provide, on the contrary, an opportunity for the students to bring many different points of views. Diverging opinions are always encouraged and students within a “same” culture do not all agree (not all Americans think that the “American dream” is still alive) and French students will sometimes vigorously disagree and argue with each other. The end result is that the other students are not presented with a monolithic view of the culture but a broad, pluralistic, kaleidoscopic portrait of the culture.

Foreign students also add to the multiple cultural variations in play during the online discussion forums. It is very important to note that our classes (on both sides) include quite a few foreign students (students from Cameroon and China in France, for instance, or students from Eastern Europe and the Middle East at MIT). Those foreign students have a very important role to play. They offer other voices, and share yet different perspectives. As both outsiders and insiders (they are always encouraged to state their origin as they write), they often play the role of mediators, addressing themselves both to the Americans and the French; explaining what their classmates may mean). In the discussion based on the hypothetical situation where a bank employee addresses you by your first name, for instance, an MIT student from China, wrote: “I guess that addressing people by first name in the US is more or less a social norm. It is a way of being friendly and make people feel welcomed. I’m originally from China, and the way in which people address each other in professional settings is very similar to that in France. Respect and mannerism are the priorities”.

In the course of these conversations, students in the MIT French class learn about French cultural attitudes and values from their counterparts in many different areas. They gradually notice, for instance: the tendency of the French to be more confrontational when someone transgresses rules (such as cutting in line, speaking aloud at a movie theater or throwing a can of soda on the sidewalk) and their penchant to teach the transgressor a lesson; their need for privacy as well as their strong expectations of respectful behavior in public spaces; the reasons for their reluctance to tell on a cheating student; the changing attitudes towards discipline (whereas ten years ago, it might have been possible to slap a child, a teacher who slaps a child can now be sued by parents and risks jail time); the emphasis the French seem to put on balance (a “good student” is one who studies hard but who

28 an excerpt from her book: French or Foe (published by Culture Crossings Ltd in XXX) appears in the Cultura Library.
29 from a Spring 04 semester exchange
also knows how to relax and play); their attitudes towards as diverse topics as the environment, Government policies or terrorism.

The MIT students learn a lot about French traits from the French themselves, who do not hesitate to describe themselves as “râleurs” [complainers] and who even admit that they “aiment râler ensemble” [like to complain together] - a trait they seem rather proud of and would not mind exporting to the US, as suggested by the following comment (in the forum about the situation when someone cuts in front of you in a line)… “Quelqu'un qui passe devant vous au cinéma, parlant fort et riant en vous lançant des regards, ça ne vous donnerait pas envie de "râler" à la française? ^_^ (sic) ≈ ["Someone cuts in front of you in a line for a movie, speaking aloud and laughing while looking at you, wouldn't that make you want to complain the way the French do?"]

The continuous exchanges and the constant revisiting of notions often lead students to come up, themselves, at the end of their journey, with great insights about the French such as: “I would venture to hypothesize that the French expect strong authority in their lives, but simultaneously revolt against it in its practice. What say you?”

In the process of comparing their diverse cultures, students also often make discoveries about their own. In reaction to a posting by Martin, one of her classmates who had written: “I tend to notice that many Americans try to avoid confrontation as much as possible. While deep down it would really bother me to be cut in line by a complete stranger, I don’t know them and I can’t imagine starting a verbal confrontation with them”, another MIT student wrote: “Perhaps Martin has made a good point? I tend to want to avoid confrontation when I can (without, of course, causing myself harm), and I thought it was due to my personality. But perhaps Americans in general tend to want to avoid confrontation unless absolutely necessary”.

Sometimes, the conversations will focus on the uses of language itself such as the respective values of words or the different ways one can ask for something in French. The following posting, taking place after a class discussion, is a case in point. “In class, we discussed the indications of the word "friendly," and we think that there might be a difference in the French "friendly" and the American "friendly." In the U.S., we often say that someone is "friendly" if the person is a nice person who doesn’t do particular harm to others. By saying that our neighbors are "friendly," perhaps we mean nothing more than to say that our neighbors greet us when we pass by, or something along those lines. We don’t mean that we share life stories with neighbors - we’re not "friends" with our neighbors (though, I suppose it could be possible). Being a friend and being friendly are different things”. Such a conversation can go a long way in making the French realize that the word “friend” in the US and in France have very different connotations.

In response to the following question posed by an MIT student (in the context of the situation in the movies where people make loud comments about the movie) “A lot of Lille 3 students responded with "je leur demande de se taire" or an equivalent. Is this polite in France? I cannot tell, since there is no adverb. In English, to ask someone to be quiet does not have a negative connotation where to tell someone does. Lucie, a student from Lille 3 responds: "Le fait de dire : "je lui demande de se taire" ne donne pas de précision sur la manière dont on demanderait à cette personne de se taire: ça pourrait être "tais-toi" ou "taisez-vous" ou "taisez-vous s'il vous plaît", "est-ce que vous pouvez vous taire s'il vous plaît"... et en dernier recours, "la ferme" ou "la gueule" dans le cas où on est carrément excédé! [Saying, “I ask him/her to keep quiet” does not indeed give any indication as to the way one would ask that person to keep quiet. It could be “keep quiet” (using either the “tu” or “vous” form) or “please, keep quiet!” or “could you please keep quiet?” or “shut up!” or shut your trap up!”, if one is totally exasperated”]

Other French students in the same forum will chime in and also remark on the importance of intonation when expressing displeasure. Il est clair qu’en demandant de se taire, nous dirions quelque chose du style "pourriez-vous vous taire s’il vous plaît?", ce qui est poli, mais l’intonation de la phrase peut la rendre peu polie”. [It is clear that when asking someone to keep quiet, we would say something like: “could you please keep quiet?” which is polite, but the intonation used can make it less polite”. Or: “Pour ce qui est de la...
politesse […] le ton est également important, l'insistance sur certains mots, sur certaines parties de la phrase.” [“As far as politeness is concerned, the tone is also(equally?) important, as well as the emphasis on certain words or parts of the sentence”]

III. USING THE MATERIALS

We will describe now the work done out of class and in class with the questionnaires, the data and the images, and the process by which they come together. Since the way we use all the materials follows basically the same steps, this should illustrate clearly how we work with the other documents as well.

1. Working with the questionnaires

Once both groups of students have responded anonymously to the online questionnaires, their answers are published side-by-side.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburbs</th>
<th>Banlieue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>around a city, houses, neighborhoods</td>
<td>94, ignorance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>big, cars, old people</td>
<td>cité</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>big, open, trees, large houses, Suburbia, middle class, families, spread out</td>
<td>cité, ville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boring, bland</td>
<td>danger, délinquance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boring, white, rich</td>
<td>difficile, cité HLM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>childhood</td>
<td>difficile, immigration, aménagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>childhood, grandmother</td>
<td>difficulté, desagréable, Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children, soccer mom's, family</td>
<td>grise, sale, triste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>families, schools, safe</td>
<td>griseaille, délinquence, afrique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grass, suburbs, driving</td>
<td>misère, morte, RER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>home, strip malls, middle class</td>
<td>moche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hometown, safe, boring</td>
<td>pauvre, cloisonnent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>houses, trees, commute</td>
<td>pauvre, violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quiet, pretty, intrigues</td>
<td>périphérie, violence, agression, pauvreté</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet, Wealthy</td>
<td>racailles, cités, délinquance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>residence, park</td>
<td>Rap, Immeuble, Béton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rich, peaceful, families</td>
<td>transports, violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wasteful, soccer moms, suburbs</td>
<td>ville, lotissements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white, bicycles, beautiful lawns</td>
<td>violence, loin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yards, kids</td>
<td>violence, précarité</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>violence, vandalisme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Word Associations to Suburbs/Banlieue, Spring 2005


As shown in table 1, this mere juxtaposition allows similarities and differences to emerge immediately. A comparison of the American and French associations to the word “suburbs/banlieue” reveals the emphasis on the French side on violence and poverty: violence [violence] difficile [difficult] pauvre [poor] misère [extreme poverty]. On the American side, the emphasis is on family (families, children, soccer mom, grandmother, childhood), and greenery (yards, beautiful lawns, trees).

The work on each type of questionnaire (words, then sentences, then situations) lasts about a week. The comparative task proceeds along a series of steps combining assignments done by students individually and classroom discussions. Then it moves to discussions on the forums, which are in turn brought back into the classroom for further examination.
a. homework assignment

Students are provided with detailed worksheets that help them compare the answers, and lead them to do a close reading of the juxtaposed answers.

First, students are asked to select two or three different words from the initial questionnaire list, to print the answers for these words, and try and elucidate the vocabulary if possible, using their dictionary and annotating their lists.

Second, they underline words that appear multiple times, count them, and regroup them into larger categories. They also note what notions appear on one side and not on the other.

Third, they summarize in two or three sentences the most relevant differences they have observed, and write hypotheses to try and explain these differences.

This brings students to access both the linguistic and cultural content of the material, since the dictionary is not always enough to elucidate all the new vocabulary found in the answers. For instance French students reading the associations to suburbs/banlieue above might understand “soccer” and “mom” but not what is encompassed by the expression “soccer mom”. American students might find HLM [subsidized public housing] or RER [commuter rail around Paris] in their dictionary, but not “94”.

b. class activities

In class, the many words students have encountered while working individually are examined together, the primary document (here the questionnaire) being always at hand. Once the vocabulary has been elucidated, the students engage into an in-depth work on language, as the task of regrouping words into categories brings their attention on the subtle different ways of expressing an idea.

For instance, looking at the answers to “a good job,” students noted two different types of positive associations in the French students answers. In small group, they decided to group the following words and expressions plaisir [pleasure], s'épanouir [to be fulfilled], intéressant [interesting], te rend heureux [makes you happy], que j'aime faire [that I like to do], enrichissant [enriching] under one category entitled bonheur [happiness]. They named the second category salaire [salary] and included in it the words rémunérateur [profitable], permet de vivre décemment [makes it possible to live decently], bien rétribué [well-paid], nous donne de quoi vivre [gets us enough to live].

When discussing possible categories and corresponding titles, students look closely at the particular connotation carried by each word, and contrast their particular meaning. In the example about “a good job”, they discussed for instance the difference between intéressant [interesting] and enrichissant [enriching], and wondered if “happiness” was the common thread between these two words. This type of simple regrouping exercise leads students to expand their vocabulary as they explore the range of expressions that their foreign counterparts actually associated to a notion. It encourages them to explore a variety of words and reverses the more traditional practice of encouraging students to use a variety of words by asking them to select different items from a list usually compiled by the instructor.

The large pool of words provided in the answers also allows the class to work on word construction and grammar: are the different words adjectives, verbs, or nouns? What common noun endings emerge? Students notice for instance the recurrence in French of -isme, -eur, -tion, and -esse, and try to determine on what adjectives or verbs these nouns are based. For instance, the word
épanouissant [fulfilling] appears many times in the associations to “work”. Students find in their dictionary the noun épanouissement [fulfilment], and the corresponding verb s’épanouir [to be fulfilled].

An online search on google done during class also provides students with dynamic information. It can often reveal a lot more about the culture than would factual information from a regular encyclopaedia. For instance, a search for épanouissement [fulfilment] on google.fr reveals a total of 2 million entries for épanouissement au travail [fulfilment at work] and épanouissement dans le travail [fulfilment in work]. This indicates that the connection between these two notions, found in the answers of the French students, reflects a connection which is surprisingly widespread in the culture at large and would not have been anticipated.

The questionnaires can also lend themselves to the study of grammar, since the responses to a given questionnaire may offer multiple variations around a specific grammatical form. For instance the sentence completion questionnaire frequently generates answers with a relative pronoun. The following variations all appeared under “a good job/un bon emploi” in the questionnaire quoted earlier: dans lequel on s’épanouit [in which one finds fulfilment], qui permet de s’épanouir [which enables one to be fulfilled], où l’on peut s’épanouir [where one can be fulfilled], pour lequel je me lève avec plaisir chaque matin [for which I get up happily every morning], que j’aime faire [which I like to do]. This illustrates very convincingly for our students (since the answers were provided by their peers) that the use of relative pronouns in French is not optional or associated to a formal register (in the way “of which” is used in English), but is part of the way ordinary people express themselves.

The work on culture is closely connected to the work on language, as shown by the discussion above about épanouissement [fulfilment] and travail [work]. The class is organized in a way to elicit such discussions and ensure that the entire group will benefit from the individual work done by each student before class, and that the work done alone is enriched by the presence of others.

In the classroom students take a broader view, start synthesizing their ideas, look for patterns within the documents they analyze, and try and see whether the observations they made in one context would apply to other contexts.

Working with one or two partners who have analyzed the same word (or phrase or situation), students first exchange their observations on the differences they noticed between the two sets of answers. Then they summarize their findings on the classroom whiteboards, noting the most striking differences they have noticed; finally the teams to go from board to board to see whether cultural patterns emerge, if the same types of differences crop up in different contexts, and in what forms.

When they make connections between different sentence completion questionnaires, they notice for instance the tendency by American students to inject an affective slant into many contexts, whereas French students tend to look at a situation from a much more abstract or even aloof point of view. They see for instance that in the answers to un bon parent [a good parent], un bon prof [a good teacher], un bon médecin [a good doctor], the French tend to give responses pertaining to the role or function of that person. A good doctor and a good teacher are, above all, professionally competent, and a French good parent is someone who éduque [educates] his/her children, in the French sense of the word, namely someone who instills values. Americans, on the other hand, seem to often place a much higher value on affective qualities. A good parent “loves unconditionally”; a good doctor is “caring”; a good teacher is someone “who can teach and care,” who cares about his/her students”; “who deeply cares about the learning process.”

With the next step, the students exchange their observations on the forums.

2. Working with the forums
a. homework assignment

The notions analyzed alone or discussed in class are constantly revisited on line. In the same way as we provide our students with the necessary tools to analyze the questionnaires answers, we give them specific guidelines when working with the forums.

We ask them to go first to the forums attached to the specific words they chose to analyze when working on their own, then to post comments and observations, and follow up with one or two questions to find out more information about the notion they are exploring. They check if the French students have posted messages and questions, react to their comments and answer their questions. One forum is attached to each item in the questionnaires and have to be accessed within a specific time frame, to enable a true collaboration between both groups of students.

b. class activities

The online community and the classroom community have similar and complementary functions. There is a parallel movement between what is done alone, on line, and in the classroom. On line, the students can see how their individual comments fit both within their own group and their partner group. Similarly, when working with their peers in the classroom, students share and compare what they have discovered individually, and make connections they could not have made on their own between separate notions.

In preparation for the in class discussion about the comments posted on the forums, the students select, print and bring to class two or three comments by French students that particularly interest them, in which they found an answer to one of their questions, or because they are intrigued by a posting.

The students walk around the class and discuss with their classmates (in the target language, as is always the case in class), the comments they have brought, exchanging why they chose them.

Since the discussions in the forums are very focused, our students are exposed to words and expressions that they can immediately recycle in class, as they revisit the same notions. For instance, having discovered from the word associations to suburbs and banlieue that the realities behind these two words were starkly different, an American student, Sarah had wondered on the corresponding forum where the French middle class lived, if not in the suburbs. It prompted a French student, Tiphaine to acknowledge that there are indeed in France some quiet suburbs of the type evoked by the American students, “les quartiers résidentiels” [residential areas] and to wonder, in the same comment, why she, who lived in a quartier résidentiel, had also come up with the more common and negative association to banlieue [suburb] when answering the questionnaire.31 The students could immediately recycle this expression, which they could not have come up with on their own, into the class discussions.

During the class discussions, the teacher moves from group to group and, if necessary, at the end, highlights on one particular comment that s/he believes may have been misunderstood or merits more attention, because it may contain something the students may have missed. For instance an American student remarked in class that it was strange that the French who participated in the forum

31 Full quote: “Pour moi il y a deux sortes de banlieues: - Les banlieues au sens péjoratif, c'est à dire les cités, HLM où il y a beaucoup de violence... - Les banlieues qui ressemblent plus aux vôtres, c'est à dire les quartiers résidentiels dans d'autres villes” [for me, there are tow types of suburbs: - the suburbs with a negative connotation, that is the housing projects, low cost housing, where there is a lot of violence… - the suburbs that are more like yours, that is, the residential areas in some other cities.]
all seemed to imply that their neighbors were noisy. A French student had stated in the forum “En France il y a aussi de bons voisins (quand même!) mais ils le sont rarement tous. Par exemple, l’interdiction de tapage nocturne après 22 heures est peu respectée… les voisins peuvent être amicaux, mais ils sont souvent bruyants” (Benedicte, forum “good neighbor/bon voisin”) [in France there are some good neighbors (still!) but they are rarely all good. For instance, making noise is prohibited after 10:00 pm, but few people respect this rule… Neighbors can be friendly, but they are often noisy.] The American student who brought this quote to class wondered if the people who complained about the noise considered themselves noisy too, or if they considered themselves to be the exception? As students were intrigued by the hard to translate expression tapage nocturne, which in an online translator came up as: “disturbance at night” or “night noise”, a google.fr search during class brought forth many items having to do with tapage nocturne, notably a recent article in a major French newspaper, Le Figaro, titled “Tapage nocturne, les nuisances en chiffres” [noise at night, statistics about the nuisance] with a lot of reader reactions attached to it, which seemed to confirm a general preoccupation with this issue in French culture.32

3. Working with the other materials

a. Data

Homework assignment. The students’ scope of investigation broadens progressively beyond the questionnaires. In order to put their observations into a larger context and to anchor their observations with specific data, they search on line a large number of statistics, opinion polls and surveys, thus both recalibrating their earlier findings and expanding their knowledge. Then they discuss their findings, both in the classroom and online.

Here again students are given very specific guidelines: select one or two topics of interest that have been touched on in the questionnaires, the forums and the class discussions (such as for instance family; work; discipline; freedom); investigate them further, reading statistics or surveys available on line. Then they are asked to post on the Data forum at least two different messages where they summarize their findings and ask the French students what they think about them. They always indicate their source, so that the documents they quote can be accessed by the others. To help organize the forum, they also give a title to their message to clearly indicate the topic it illustrates.

The statistics or surveys posted in the data forums often confirm or contradict what has been discovered so far. For instance, a student who researched “family” stated in the data forum that the surveys “confirmed that the French consider […] the notion of respect essential in the education of children.” (Fall 2006).

The work with statistics and surveys is a chance for students to investigate a topic in-depth and find out directly from their transatlantic partners how they interpret it. The following exchange, from the spring 2006, illustrates very well this whole process. A student stated: “I found another staggering statistics that 89% of French youth believe that the most racism in France is directed at the Maghrebins. Now, I had to google Maghrebins to see exactly where they were from/who they were, and I found that they are from the north-west part of Africa. Can anyone explain to me why so much racism is directed against these people?” The many French students who directly reacted to her post gave elaborate answers, hinting at French history from the second half of the 20th century, and the afflux massif de main d’oeuvre [massive influx of workers] from North African countries. Another one hinted at a link with the war in Algeria, drawing a parallel with the war in Vietnam, and concluding

“Je ne peux pas t'expliquer ici tous les tenants et les aboutissants de cette période, mais tu dois pouvoir comprendre pas mal de choses en faisant des recherches sur les termes "harkis", "pieds-noirs" ou "putsch des généraux". Si après cela, certaines parties de cette page douloureuse de l'histoire de France (encore une !) te paraissent encore obscures, n'hésite pas à poser des questions.” [I cannot explain here all the causes and consequences of this period, but you should be able to understand many things if you look for the words “harkis”, “pieds-noirs” or “putsch by the generals”. If after that some parts of this painful time in French history (one more) still remain obscure, do not hesitate to ask questions.]

**Class activities.** The work with data and surveys lends itself to many different types of class activities. Students, who have worked in teams, summarize the surveys they found about a particular topic on the white boards and then, as students move from board to board, will explain what that survey illustrates for them and how it confirms or denies an aspect of French culture they have found in the forums. This is followed by whole class discussions.

Or each student will quickly access the website where they fond the survey and present it for the other students. Class discussions follow.

Sometimes, if a survey found by a student is deemed particularly interesting by the instructor, then he can project it and spend a good deal of time on it.

Once a student - who was interested in the frequent references by the French students to the notion of “égalité” [equality], had brought to class a survey (from January 2007) from the SOFRES polling company entitled: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité : notre devise vue par les Français*[^1], which asked the French how they viewed their national motto. He commented it, in terms of whether it confirmed or contradicted what he had already observed from the questionnaires and the forums.

The first question asked which of the three words of the French Republic motto, “liberté” [freedom], “égalité” [equality] and “fraternité” [fraternity] were the most important. 52% of respondents chose “liberté”. The next question asked what fourth word could be added to this motto. The answers given were (in this order) “respect” [respect] (which came up as 1st or 2nd choice 68% of the time) “sécurité” [security], “éducation” [education], “écologie” [ecology], “bonheur” [happiness], “laïcité” [secularism], and “progrès” [progress].

[^1]: [http://www.tns-sofres.com/points-de-vue/F79CB4E76E4340EF974F8A69A18DBEC1.aspx](http://www.tns-sofres.com/points-de-vue/F79CB4E76E4340EF974F8A69A18DBEC1.aspx)
This very document lent itself to a subsequent class discussion, with the teacher taking the lead with a few probing questions. Focusing on the second question in the survey, the teacher asked the students whether these words or the order in which they appeared surprised them in view of what they had learnt so far about the French; whether the order would be the same if the question were asked to Americans; if not, what would come first; if the US was to invent a national motto with three words, which would those be? Focusing on such a document provides a good opportunity to bring different strands together and to have students revisit notions via a different, external lens.

**b. images**

**Homework assignment.** The images module stemmed from an original idea of a visual bi-cultural dictionary. The students, forming teams across the two cultures, agree on subjects they want to illustrate together. These can stem from the questionnaires, such as suburbs/banlieue, or they can illustrate any topic of the students’ choice such as food, transportation, sports, fashion, campus life, or daily life. Students select which images or videos related to one aspect of their own culture they want to upload on the Images module (theses can be photos they take themselves or pictures they glean from the Web). Each group posts and creates their own collections of photos, adding a comment under each image so that the foreign partners can understand the context. One semester, in a collection which the students created and entitled: “What we eat, when and where”, Ryan writes, as a comment to a picture in which he is seen eating a bagel on his bicycle, “When I don't have time to eat breakfast in the morning (too much French homework! : -)) I have a bagel on my way to school. This often leaves me hungry still....”

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34 We use the MIT metamedia which provides students (and faculty) with a flexible on-line environment to create, annotate and share media-rich documents.

35 In the Fall 06 exchange
Among the topics chosen, food is one of the most popular ones, with the Americans often showing ice cream, donuts, pizza, soda, and the French showing images about local specialties, bread, cheese, foie gras, chocolat, and pastries, and talking at length about them, their enthusiasm about food reflected in their frequent use of many exclamation marks, and expressions such as “j'espère que je vous mets l'eau à la bouche” [I hope your mouth is watering.]

However, as innocuous a subject as food is, it often is the entry into a much more complex set of issues. One semester a group of students from France and the US had simply chosen “coffee” as a topic to illustrate. That seemingly plain topic led them to discuss many underlying cultural issues: when does a student drink coffee? Where? In what kind of setting? In what kind of container?

American students uploaded pictures of coffee in a paper cup, often with a sleeve advertising a product or a store. One took a picture of her Professor, with the following caption: Professor bringing students coffee and the following comment: “This is a picture of one of my professors bringing several students coffee. This was taken early in the morning just before we set up full size mock-ups that we had been working on for the past two days. The coffee was purchased at a gas station across the street from our studio”.

Such a picture, never to be seen in a French university, resulted in an on-line conversation not only about the relationship between professors and students but also about the size of coffee cups in France and the US, about the place where you drink coffee (in the US, it is something you take with you, often drink on the go, either on the road or on your way to class whereas in France you usually go to a café to drink it). In that same Image forum, a French student uploaded a picture of a glass full of coffee on top of a china cup on a table, with a small spoon and two cookies next to it and it was accompanied by the following caption: “Un petit café dans ma chambre” [a small cup of coffee in my room]. This picture prompted a question by an MIT student: “Why do you drink your coffee in a glass like this? Is it common?”. The answer quickly came: “C'est assez joli et j'aime boire mon café dans une tasse stylée. Pour moi le moment du café est un moment important dans la journée d'où cette jolie présentation”. [It’s rather pretty and I like to drink my coffee in a stylish cup. For me drinking coffee is an important moment in the day, which will explain this attractive presentation].

These collections of images leads students to discover previously hidden aspects of the other culture as well as their own.

Students are also encouraged, when writing their comments, to make connections with other aspects of the culture they had previously discovered. In one instance, when discussing sports, based on the images of baseball and basketball (which the Americans had uploaded) and images of a traditional game of pétanque (which a French student had uploaded, while acknowledging he hardly ever plays it), an American student remarked on the accompanying forum that the Americans seemed to focus on the sports in their daily life, whereas the French notion of daily life seemed to encompass history, beauty and connections to the past—an observation which they had already made when analyzing the word associations to France, in the questionnaires.

**Class activities.** The classroom is the place where such connections are taken to yet another level. Students are asked to come to class, ready to make comments not only about their reactions to individual pictures but also about the type of pictures students take. After an exchange in the fall 2005, students came to class having noticed, for instance, that the American students tended to show more about themselves when illustrating their daily life, posting for instance pictures of themselves, their family, their dog, their friends, their messy dorm room (“I know it’s messy, but it’s small”, “It’s messy here, but I guess that it is realistic”), whereas the French students tended to show objects and places, but rarely themselves, showing the exterior of the dorm, instead of their own room.

They also felt that the French students tended to project, through the images they chose, a touristy view of their culture (the French students did not hesitate to show the Eiffel Tower, Mont Saint Michel, castles, and other historical buildings), and seemed more interested in projecting an image of themselves rather than the reality. This was followed by a class discussion on why that would be, leading some students to connect the French choice of images to their notion of privacy, which the French had mentioned in several contexts, and their reluctance to be “seen”.

Classroom is also the place where a discussion based on one simple object (such as a cup of coffee) will lead to a broader discussion about the notion of size in different cultures: about America, where everything is excessively big, be soda cup, trucks, stores and parking lots or houses and about France where the word “petit” [small] takes on a cherished aura.

The images and videos which students upload are also the frequent subject of end-of-semester oral presentations, with each group showing the pictures and commenting them as cultural objects. And in that context, students will occasionally find a parallel between the type of images the French and the American students take and their written discourses in the forums, contrasting the frequent references Americans make to their own life experiences and the tendency by the French to write in much more general, prescriptive and abstract terms and use such expressions as “Il faut savoir que, en France”.. [you must know that in France..]..

IV. THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

1. Emerging Pedagogy

The role of learner and teacher are intertwined. Cultura, by virtue of engaging learners in a dynamic process of discovery, exploration and inquiry, together with learners from another culture), favors a collective, constructivist approach to learning. Students are like “cultural archeologists”, trying to make initial connections which they then try to confirm or revise in the light of new materials they analyze. The classroom is a highly interactive place where students, taking center stage and interacting with their classmates, develop more insights, co-construct and expand their own knowledge and understanding of the subject matter.

Discussions in class enable students to situate themselves in relation to others, to take hold of similarities and differences in personal opinions and reactions within the group, and to start identifying the many and complex factors influencing their attitudes.

The blackboards play a vital role as they make the students’ observations visible to the whole class, as they write lists of words, draw lines and arrows, plus and minus signs, circle words, regroup them, cross them out, and reorganize them. They act as wonderful mirrors of the students’ thought processes and as springboards for further general reflection, interpretation and discussion.

This methodology brings the process of constructing knowledge into the limelight, not the finished product. As much as the simple process of juxtaposition of answers from the two different groups of students, on the screen, reveals hidden patterns, the lists of words on the board records the ongoing analysis, renders apparent connections, similarities, contradictions, oppositions between concepts which were unseen, or which could have gone unnoticed.

Students become able to see an idea and its opposite, realize that a question might have multiple answers, and learn to deal with the complexity at hand, as they try and make sense of the emerging contradictions.

In such a classroom, the instructor does not need to know everything about the target culture, and has to accept not being the only voice of authority. The instructor's role is to probe students to push their analysis further and to demonstrate their point, asking them to always anchor a demonstration upon a document everybody in the class can look at, to find examples taken from the forums or the questionnaires.

The instructor asks students who have come up with an hypothesis about the other culture to examine in what contexts it works, in what contexts it does not work, what its limits are. This leads
students to realize that context is an important element of understanding another culture, as well as one’s own.

It is necessary to push students further when they try to apply one explanation to make sense of different aspects of the other culture or oversimplify. For instance the idea that “individualism” equals “egoism” for the French students (as illustrated in their associations to the word “individualism”) could give way to a misinterpretation and over generalization, assuming that the group is always more important than the individual. This assumption is shattered when looking closely at answers to “un bon voisin” [a good neighbor] who must be discreet [discreet] or the reaction to the situation “a mother slaps her child” ça la regarde [none of my business] or “a student cheats” c’est son problème [that’s his problem].

It is also necessary to encourage students to dig into the under layers of the other culture. For instance s student who remarks that “respect” is very important for the French, and who supports his point with many examples, will be encouraged to think about why the French attach so much importance to respect, and to consider what the social function of respect is.

In the classroom, it is particularly important to give students time for individual reflection, or conformity to the group will prevail; to give them time in small group, and be particularly diligent during the debriefing: who are the comments directed to? Who gives feedback? to make sure that the ideas are examined against a multiplicity of contexts: words, sentences, situations; to encourage students to explore correlations between notions, look for similarities when they exist, but also recognize paradoxes: for instance, does insistence upon politeness, so prevalent in the French students’ answers, entitle one to be extremely rude when teaching someone a lesson in manners. Is it possible to be aggressively polite?

Finally, it is very important to keep the flow going between individual and group reflection, class and forums. The questions, after being debated in class, are brought back to the forums, and the cultural dialogue is broadened again.

**Evaluation.** This is a very important task and a particularly challenging one. In general, we evaluate a finished product, whether it is a paper or an oral presentation. However, Cultura is a process and the question becomes: how to evaluate a process? Students are evaluated on the strength of their argumentation (using examples, making connections) during the class discussion, when analyzing other materials such as movie, newspapers, final presentation on advertising, writing composition, their participation in the forums.
APPENDIX A

Please note: all these instructions are given to our students in the target language. They have been translated here for the purpose of this chapter.

The project Cultura: Objective and Method

*Cultura* is an intercultural project with the objective to help you understand better the cultural differences between France and the United States. It will enable you to compare, on the Web, a variety of parallel documents from both cultures and to communicate, about these documents, with French students at the University of Lille 3.

The project unfolds in many different steps

**Step 1:** you answer three types of questionnaires on the web.

**Step 2:** you compare the French and the American answers to these questionnaires and make personal observations. Then you make hypotheses about these differences.

**Step 3:** you send your observations to the French students (on the forum) and follow up with questions. They will do the same.

This is the main goal of *Cultura*.

**Important:** always write in English on the Web. The French students will write in French. However, all your written assignments for the class and all your class notes will be in French.
**Grid for the word associations analysis**

1. Write down the words and expressions that appear the most often in both languages; organize them into categories.
2. Are the connotations negative, positive or neutral?
3. Write your remarks, hypothesis, and questions. These comments will be used as a starting point for the classroom discussions and for the forums.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word number 1:</th>
<th>American categories that appear most often</th>
<th>French categories that appear most often</th>
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<tr>
<td>Are the connotations positive, negative or neutral? Write examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write your remarks, hypothesis, and questions. These comments will be used as a starting point for the classroom discussions and for the forums.</td>
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</table>
1. Contradictions are not always resolved, but they are always raised. And though they are often raised spontaneously, we do encourage students to do so, often creating a forum specifically dedicated to that end. These forums are usually introduced by specific prompts, such as: *This forum is for (1) raising what you see as paradoxes in the other culture (which you have discovered across several questionnaire answers and/or the comments on the forums) and (2) for offering possible hypotheses and interpretations to your transatlantic partners’ own queries.* We feel that creating such dedicated forum is important, as it truly encourages the students to dig further and think more critically about the other culture, in an effort to put the cultural puzzle together.

2. In the process of learning about attitudes and values, students also learn a wealth of information about current French life and society via the very contemporary and authentic vocabulary the French use. By virtue of being written in the “native language”, our students learn what 94 (pronounced 9/4) means (in the context of “banlieues”), about “tapage nocturne”(in the context of a good neighbor; about “les comités d’entreprise” (in the context of “a good job”, about “le Grenelle de l’environnement” (in the situation where someone throws away a can of soda on the street): they learn what a “délit de faciès” (racial profiling) and what “le plan Vigipirate” are.
They learn about the words that are common in the French language - but not in theirs even though they are cognates - words such as “précarité” or “solidarité”.

3. Students also often discuss the underlying meaning of words and whether they are the same in France and in the US.