

Intercultural education at the crossroads of commerce: The intercultural challenges of electronic technology in a diverse Europe¹

by Dr. George F. Simons

"The paradox of global culture is that, whilst it offers everyone the same products and stories to consume, it is also constantly looking for points of difference, something new to sell, or exploit. In the knowledge economy, cultural complexity doesn't simply produce wealth: it is wealth. The more you have of it the better. 'Poverty of identity' has become a handicap."

Andrew Marr, "Perils of ethnic purity," The Observer, 4 July 1999

Though this paper is being written at a time when a number of European dot.coms are becoming dot.bombs and serious regrouping is going on in the mobile phone industry, it is undeniable that a new business environment has been and will continue to take shape worldwide as a consequence of the technological boom, whatever the mood swings of the financial markets. The explosion of business-to-business and business-to-consumer e-commerce is changing the ground rules of marketing and sales as well as the definition of assets. "Bricks and mortar" businesses either become "clicks and mortar" enterprises or risk being left out of the new net economy. Virtual organizations--clicks without the mortar--also need to be seen as serious competitors for traditional ways of doing business as more and more intangible assets become the locus of value and many tangible ones become increasingly irrelevant. These same dynamics are affecting the delivery of intercultural education both academic and applied, as well as other cultural services.

It is hard to measure the cultural impact of the speed and magnitude of change enabled by information technologies because like the media before them, they are capable of reinforcing culture and redefining it at the same time. Change is no longer a matter of periodic evaluation and bursts of activity, but a constant companion to our work and indeed a strategy for carrying it out. This goes down harder in Europe than it does in North America because rapid change does not automatically respect deeply rooted diversity and its traditions and accomplishments. Europe at first gave the impression of being dragged into the electronic age, kicking and screaming, and *blaming America*. This cultural resistance was not necessarily a bad thing. It assured that the diversity of Europe will add its own value to the debate about what the future will be. On the other hand, US products currently dominate the intercultural learning market.

Risk avoidance has been particularly responsible for slowing development in the European high tech sector and consequently in intercultural work. Specifically capitalization and start-up of high tech ventures have been hobbled by:

- Excessive regulatory demands on start-ups which can take up to ten times as long to pass through as in the US.
- Heavy taxation of stock options that prevent their being used as incentives for employees in high tech start-ups, and heavy social charges for those same employees
- Draconian punishment for failure and little relief from creditors.

¹ This text is taken from Simons, Dr. George F., et al, *EuroDiversity: a business guide to managing difference*, 2002. Butterworth Heinemann Publishers, Oxford, UK and Woburn, MA. ©2001. All rights reserved.

- Lack of connection and collaboration between academic and research institutes and businesses and the lesser availability of academics for consulting and involvement in enterprises. ["New economy, old problems" In The Economist: a survey of European business, The Economist, April 29th 2000, pp. 23-25.]

Despite all this, however, Europe already with a lead in mobile technology is now speeding toward an Internet business culture. Shortly there will be more Internet users in Europe than in the USA. As mentioned above, hindrances to entrepreneurship in European States have slowed the development of eCommerce, but it too, should surpass that of the US in the next several years. This is an open field for just-in-time intercultural education. Starting with the European "Declaration On A European Policy For New Information Technologies" of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 1999 both EU and national governments have set agendas for the digital society.

A common determination

While each of the EU countries has set its own goals for elearning and online education in the new digital economy, is perhaps more useful to look at one of the ongoing tools for staying au courant with what is happening in this field. PROACTe [<http://www.proacte.com/>] is a service to communicate work funded by the European Union under the Education Area of the Information Society (IST) Program. At PROACTe you can find out in English, German or French what EU projects in educational technologies are doing, discover resources and news on education and training using IT in Europe, and discuss the opportunities and challenges in this fast-developing area. PROACTe encourages dialogue in the field of educational technologies and provides online access to resources for developing promotional activities, a database of important media contacts, and other players in the field of education technology. Management of PROACTe is currently contracted to ECOTEC Research and Consulting, Ltd., a group providing information and communication services.

Globalizing means catching up socially as well as technically

The theme of the 2000 Lisbon Summit was Employment, Economic Reforms and Social Cohesion--Towards a Europe Based on Information and Knowledge. Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Guterres announced the "Lisbon strategy", which aims at combining business competitiveness, employment and fight against social exclusion. They agreed to develop measures and deadlines by the year 2010 in order to increase economic growth by 3% annually; to create 20 million jobs; to increase the number of employed women from 51% to 60%; identify common indicators to exchange best practises in education and in fighting social exclusion; cut by half the number of 18-24 year olds without further education or training; and build partnerships between educational and training institutions and companies and research institutes. They also agreed on the need to create an "eEurope", an electronic Europe, in order to improve both the economic and the social systems. In particular, they fostered: adopting a legal framework for e-commerce; liberalizing telecommunications markets; increasing the competition in local Internet access networks; cutting costs of Internet use; and providing all schools with Internet access and skilled teachers.

The EU is making efforts to reduce the gap in information technology between its members and their competitors. In 1996, they created an on line Market Access Database. It has three main aims: 1) to list trade barriers to European exports in the different countries outside the EU and guarantee constant monitoring and intervention for each identified barrier; 2) to provide basic information to European exporters on applicable taxes, trademarks, export licences, etc.; 3) to

provide an interactive communication tool for an on-line exchange of information between enterprises and European authorities. The main sections are: sectorial and trade barriers, applied tariffs, and the exporter's guide to import formalities. On the other hand, people who express skepticism over a globalizing Europe, or even a globalizing world, are not only those who invaded the streets in Nice when a new treaty had to be signed at the end of 2000. Some business managers and economic scientists have troubles in finding agreement on global rules. The Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI) failed, the World Trade Organization was heavily contested in Seattle, and the Conference on Climate held at The Hague was one more failure in the attempts at globalization of the turn of the last millennium. It is important to recognize that these commercial ventures require components of intercultural education that are largely delivered in the form of practical advice.

Portugal finds a forefront

The enthusiasm of Portugal for a digital future is perhaps unmatched elsewhere in Europe. US e-learning guru, Elliott Masie, while keynoting the first e-learning conference in Portugal was struck by both the earnestness and the focus of the Portuguese effort. Discussion focused, not as is commonly so in the US, on the technical problems and needs, but on how e-Learning would change the shape and culture of organizations and the learning establishment and the effect that collaboration might bring to bear on the development of openness and trust in user groups. The discussion of e-learning in Portugal as we have observed in other EU countries is not discussed solely in commercial or academic contexts, but is intimately linked to broader economic, societal and political agendas. The national priorities for developing capabilities were proudly expressed and sounded much like objectives in a corporate mission statement, viz.,

- to provide lifelong learning to a broader range of citizens, regardless of location.
- to provide strategic training to fill a current or sudden skill gap in the labor marketplace.
- to provide access to international expertise with a localization of both language and context.
- to export subject matter expertise from Portugal to the global economy.
- to use e-Learning across the entire supply chain, from customers to suppliers to partners, allowing companies in Portugal to be more agile in competing in e-marketplaces.
- to leverage collaborative technology to link learners throughout Portugal and Portuguese speaking countries. [Masie, Elliot, TechLearn TRENDS #169, June 1, 2000, <http://www.masie.com>]

The inevitable shifting of culture in media and on the net

A recent ad for a European high tech service company, pictures an aged couple earnestly focused on something in front of them while the voiceover talks about serving the diversity of customers not as groups, but as individuals. As the camera backs away from the couple the viewer sees from the controllers in their wrinkled and liver-spotted hands that they are passionately playing a video game together. In a world where we are promised "anything we want" and that we can "have it our way," the cultural component of our personal desires, no matter how unlikely, becomes of enormous interest to suppliers of goods and services. The glory of the industrial age was mass production. Henry Ford made it possible for the average person to drive a Model T--as long as it was black. It didn't take too long however for this to give way to lines of customization to fill multiple market niches. Today you may build your own car or computer on the Internet and have

it delivered in a couple of days. Mass personalization is the latest trend in the evolution of product development and perhaps the best positioned to both serve and take advantage of cultural diversity.

In the small Mediterranean town of Mandelieu-la Napoule on the Mediterranean coast of France, there is a large commercial center dominated by a Géant hypermarket. Géant is true to its name a giant store where one can buy virtually everything for the table, the home, the office, the playroom, the wardrobe or the garage, and you can pre-shop for bargains on-line to get discounts when you arrive. Unlike stores of this magnitude in North America such as Costco, there are not only the standard shelves laden with products and produce from Europe and the rest of the world, but also regular feature presentations where several aisles are created to promote the cuisine or products of a specific country. What really catches one's attention, however, are the almost weekly appearances of stalls or sales areas specifically set up to promote the delicious, high quality products of *terroirs* or regions of France. While working on this article, the author took a break to get the mail. Not to be outdone, Carrefour, among the largest of French grocery chains and a competitor to Géant, had deposited a flyer in the mailbox advertising a France where "the regions treat us to their flavors." Every region was represented on a large map of the country with a specialty sale item during the coming week.

Next door to the Géant is a MacDonalds restaurant complete with and large indoor play area for the children. Sensitive to its situation as a global and very American organization in another culture, *MacDo*, has taken up the challenge of marketing to the French palate. Though it, too, has regular campaigns in which Big Macs are transformed for worldwide tastes (Mexican, Chinese, East Indian flavored burgers) *MacDo* bravely tackled the French *terroirs* using a dozen varieties of local breads, condiments and sauces from all corners of the *Hexagone*, to dress up the humble *Mac à la Provençale*, *à la Bretonne*, and with half a dozen other regional guises. *MacDo* is the symbolic target of resistance to globalization on the part of many French activists, perhaps because it is almost always full...

Meanwhile, a kilometer away in the old town of Napoule, Le Bon Poulet, a traditional *traiteur*, with a scant 24 square meters of floor space, specializing in roast chickens and ribs, is designing its web site in five languages to take orders from the laptop-toting tourists and the resident international community.

The real question here is whether in the case of *MacDo*, Géant or even Le Bon Poulet we are looking at the propagation or dilution of cultural values. The realistic answer is probably both. Culture is a living thing that changes with all forms of contact and has always done so. The difference today is that there is infinitely more contact than before. That puts the onus on us to either intelligently debate and try to guide its course or dig in and resist contact to preserve what we want, using some prototype of what we (subjectively) as individuals or a group feel to be the correct or best expression of the culture. This too, inevitably changes culture. Whether one is a radical constructionist who believes that saying things creates them in reality or a Taleban cleric enforcing the strictest *sharia*, one is in fact changing culture. This is why the active search for value added in diversity is the safest and most substantial means for sustaining culture and cultural life. It is also why we need both real and cybermuseums of all kinds to preserve strains of culture that both give us comfort about who we have been and are, and that may be rediscovered to add value at a future time. Paying attention to the cultural educative power of product development and advertising

is an area of intercultural education that may seem too mundane for many interculturalists, but it is definitely where the action is.

Getting it right

When it comes to crossing cultures, the advertising industry, because of its enormous stake, has got to get it right. They need the value added of diverse perspectives to succeed at their job. Unlike many other undertakings, advertisers receive relatively quick feedback, at least in the form of sales response. They need to be in touch with the stereotypes that move people as well as the ones that annoy them, and constantly monitor the cultural fads.

The truly pan-European ad is a rarity, and for advertisers, a "Holy Grail" that, in many cases, may not merit the quest. In spite of globalization, very few products seem identical all over the world. Among them are Coca-Cola, Mars, Mach3 by Gillette, Pampers, Pringles chips, Ariel for washing clothes, Nivea cream and the detergent Ajax. According to AC Nielsen, an expert in marketing and market analyses, these products succeeded in becoming global as they can have similar prices and customers perceive them through the same types of advertisement. [Dipollina, A., "Europa divisa al supermarket", *Il Venerdì di Repubblica*, June 9th 2000, pp. 75-78.]

For the rest, it is the skill at adaptation to local culture that counts. Here is how it works. Current marketing strategy attempts to identify the essence of the brand and then pay attention to local values and preferences in its storyboard and execution. Let's look at MacDonalds once again. Characterizing the McDonald brand as a safe family place for sharing food and intimacy, campaigns were reported by the Leo Burnett agency in London as follows:

"... an ad from Belgium, in which a small boy, obviously distraught because he has new eyeglasses, is taken by his mother to McDonald's, sees how the glasses seem to magnify the hamburgers, flirts with a little girl, and cheers up. In an ad from Sweden, a working mother who schemes to get out of a business meeting, only to have her boss cancel it, takes her daughter to McDonald's and sees the boss there with his son. In a British ad called 'The Go-Between,' a boy maneuvers his father into taking him to McDonald's, where the dad runs into his estranged wife and chats sweetly with her--to their son's delight. Finally... from the avant-gardists in Norway-- a stunning, elegiac black-and-white spot in which a boy is led by his grandmother through a city full of strange sights--long-haired, shouting men, Asian glam rockers, a girl with studs in her tongue--and arrives safely, in the end, at McDonald's.

"...in advertising, narrative is inherently local. Burnett's office in Norway had considered running the Swedish ad, since the people look alike, but discovered that it 'jarred' ...because of the perception that 'family units are more intact in Norway.' Similarly, 'The Go-Between' would be awkward in Ireland, because divorce had only just been legalized there.

"One recent McDonald's ad in Britain was called "Birds and Bees."... a little girl is potting a plant. She looks up and asks her father where babies come from. After hemming and hawing, he tries to distract her by offering to take her to McDonald's. She happily accepts and then, as the father sighs with relief, she announces that they can talk about babies over Big Macs. By playing on a father's unease in discussing sex, the ad... 'is

quintessentially British.'" [Heilemann, John, "All Europeans are not alike," *New Yorker*, April 28-May 5, 1997]

Speaking to, hearing and reading each other

The year 2000 had been declared by the European Commission to be the "European Year of Languages" giving emphasis to language education programs and urging all citizens to speak at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue. While the smaller northern European nations such as Luxembourg, Denmark and Holland have been good at multiple languages, German speakers and the Mediterranean nations have developed language competence to a lesser degree.

While this is happening, it is interesting to speculate about the impact that machine translation is making, and will make along with it instant voice interpretation which in varying degrees will be coming into service in telephony and broadcasting in the next four to twelve years. Already on the Internet multiple language sites are common and search engines offer immediate translations of the pages one searches for. Europe with its large population, its multiplicity of languages and cultures and its high level of affordable technology stands to reap the biggest gains from this development.

The ability to hear and read everything in one's own language will affect everything we are talking about the field of culture, but raises more questions than it can answer. Will hearing and reading each other in our own language, make us less or more inclined to acquire cultural skills? What will it do to our motivation and efforts to learn to communicate with each other? Will this slow or even reverse the dominance of English and other principal languages now used as second languages? Does it lead in the direction of greater or lesser connections with each other? Will it revolutionize cultural exchange or stagnate it? As with most technological revolutions, this one too will probably depend very much on what values we bring to it and what uses we make of it.

e-Commerce and the "hidden" new economy

"Having it our way" is a business-to-consumer challenge that is more and more evident in the way products are advertised, designed, produced and delivered, and therefore the cultural shift involved is relatively easy to see and discuss. On the other hand, the vast percentage of e-commerce goes unseen by the average person. It lies in the broadband communication webs in which business-to-business transactions take place. A recent TV commercial advertisement shows a harried Manager beleaguering his subordinates because a supply of plastic parts for the company's mobile phone product is desperately needed. He paces the floor and barks orders to them to find out where a new supplier can be had immediately. One young manager is calmly but busily typing at his laptop. The annoyed manager asks him if he is paying attention. He says, "No." He has in fact just ordered the needed parts on the web.

In the net economy, traditional roles of suppliers, customers and partners are blurred. This does not mean confused. It means that organizations and parts of organizations are playing multiple roles simultaneously in the new marketplace made possible by new technology. [for a good look at these cultural shifts in doing business, see: Davis, Stanley M, and Christopher Meyer, *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy*, 1999 Warner Books]. It is almost possible to think of information as the only real commodity, and it only takes a few minutes looking at business sites on the web to see that traditional market brokers are

few in evidence, but that in addition to specialized industry portals, virtually every organization sees itself on-line as a portal that is brokering information.

The new workplace is everywhere

The author of this article spends most of his time working in two areas, training largely European groups in how to succeed at virtual teamwork, and collaborating as part of a virtual team in the creation of an e-learning capability for Management Centre Europe. While these activities are Eurocentric in terms of their primary markets, they become culturally global almost immediately because nearly all of the European businesses and business people involved are either transnational or global in their markets, personnel and activities. They require intensive intercultural education.

In addition to the capability of worldwide synchronous and asynchronous team cooperation the simple fact is that most work is being transformed by the same technology. The *15 meter or 50 foot rule*, as some virtual working consultants have called it, means that in addition to virtual teams and dedicated teleworkers, most of us, in today's workplaces work virtually most of the time if we are more than this distance away from each other.

Virtual working does not make cultural differences disappear, it simply make them invisible and harder to manage. To see how culture plays out in virtual collaboration, think of virtual global teamwork as a wheel (Figure 1) with these following characteristics:

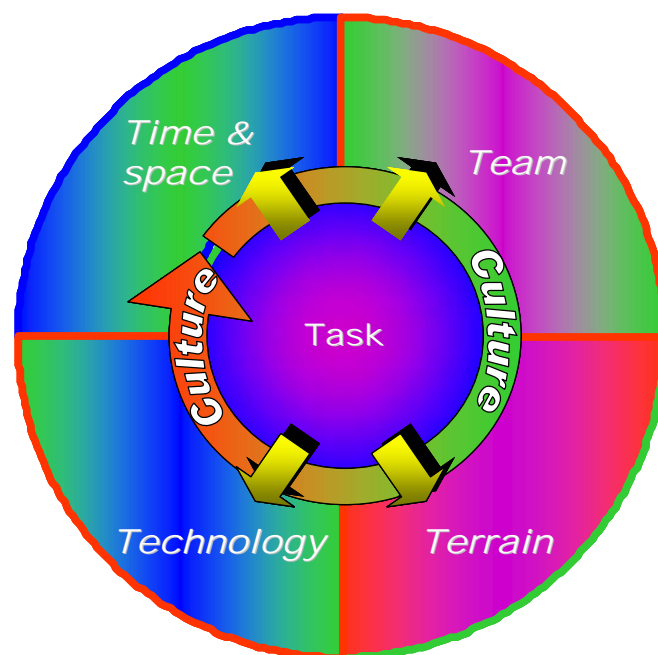


Figure 1: Virtual Teamwork Model

At its center is the **axle**. This is the task or set of objectives whose successful performance by the team contributes to how the organization reaches its goals and fulfills its mission.

Surrounding and supporting the axle are four sets of challenges that must be dealt with successfully if virtual teamwork is to roll along smoothly and in balance.

1. How **time & distance** affect the ways in which we must communicate, lead, work and manage people and projects in a distributed environment.
2. How we define, select, form and maintain a high-performing diverse distributed **team**.
3. How we manage the **terrain** or contexts in which our distributed team works. This means making sure the parent organization(s) and other stakeholders recognize, understand, support, cooperate with and reward virtual teamwork and virtual team workers.
4. How to choose the right **technology** or virtual working tools, and then learn to use them appropriately, both to do the team's assigned business task as well as maintain the social cohesion and motivation of the team.

Culture, is a key factor, because it deeply affects not one but all of these four virtual teamwork challenges. Culture can either be "grit" or "grease" that gets between the wheel and the axle that is between the team and its performance of the task. It can slow down or even halt the virtual team, or it can be turned into added value for even higher performance. Culture is an essential part of every discussion of these challenges as one can see in the diagram. Even the definition of the task, the importance with which it is seen, its feasibility and difficulty will differ by culture and the outcome will either be enhanced or endangered by the diverse perspectives of the team. In addition, each of the four team challenges needs to be culturally considered or it will run the risk of being derailed.

- *Time & distance*. Differing concepts and expectations about how time is or should be used and the absence of face-to-face contact are can quickly cause breakdowns in communication, authority and commitments.
- Multicultural *Team* formation, difficult in intact teams, demands an even higher level of attention to the social and interpersonal dimensions of work when working virtually. Culturally there may be a range of understandings of what a team is and extremes of attitudes toward what requires individual initiative and what demands group cohesion.
- The *terrain* or contexts in which our distributed teams work may be in different countries with different styles and levels of management support and differing approaches to decision making and delegation. Leaders and team members need to know how to strategize to get what they need to function well together across a variety of organizational and regional cultures, particularly when local pressures and demands.
- Even *technology* is not culture free. How one uses what tools and when they are used can differ significantly among team members and working locations.

The cultural issues surrounding virtual teams are not essentially European, but global in nature. One working team consisting of three Europeans, one Australian, one American and one Canadian took several months of exchanges on-line to identify, define and discuss the cultural factors that were likely to affect their collaboration with each other and with their customers and other business contacts. Their final list of tips and best practices for working together virtually ran to eighteen A4 pages when printed out.

The point to be made here is that in dealing with Europeans and when Europeans are dealing with each other, one needs to explore differences and have cultural conversations on a regular basis to keep the team functioning smoothly and on track. We have found that one best practice for getting this conversation going is to use a an instrument that gets the team discussing and comparing for understanding, either face-to-face or on line, their individual differences. There

are a number of cultural instruments such as The Cultural Orientation Inventory (COI). [http://www.tmc Corp.com/coi_nav_flash.html]. For a list of other such instruments, see <http://www.imquarterly.com/assesstools.htm>]. If starting directly with culture is too sensitive, we recommend leading in to it by using and discussing a role oriented survey such as the Belbin [<http://www.belbin.com/>] or even the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) [<http://www.cpp-db.com/>].

Radical continuity--All aboard the eTrain!

Outside of the US East Coast commuting corridor and several urban metro systems located in the biggest cities, trains in North America are a remnant of the past, a touch of nostalgia. Not so in most of Europe where many high-tech trains provide reliable, abundant, swift and timely connections to where people want to go.

It is not surprising then, that Management Centre Europe (MCE) [www.mce.be], the Bruxelles daughter of the American Management Association (AMA), chose the metaphor of the eTrain to carry its management education efforts into the future. For many years, MCE has provided high quality management education, briefings and conferences in the heart of Europe and spun off efforts in the Middle and Far East, and most recently in Central Europe. Hiring the best of the best faculty and lecturers for its programs, it, like many other institutes, training centers and universities both corporate and academic, faced the explosion of e-learning worldwide with the question, "Where do we go from here?"

With a veritable revolution in learning underway, some organizations have decided for e-learning as their primary focus, others allowed it to develop separately and alongside their more traditional offerings as did AMA and many other institutes and academic organizations. MCE surveyed its customers carefully to see what forms of e-learning they had experienced, as well as what kinds they wanted and were prepared for, and opted for a third solution that would answer the question, "How does one blend radical innovation and continuity?" It chose to enter e-learning in such a way as to enhance and add value to its core business. The solution was one of what we might call "radical continuity," and is called hybrid, blended or balanced learning.

MCE's strategy focused on creating a "digital surround" for its courses. Digital surround means that the core value of bringing the best faculty together face-to-face with learners is retained, but dramatically enhanced in several ways. Courses are being designed in phases, a first *assessment phase* in which questionnaires, surveys and other instruments help the learner see what she or he already knows and where his or her learning objectives might lie. Faculty is likewise alerted to the strengths and weaknesses of the class so that they know what parts of the course may need special emphasis. Depending on their readiness, learners with deficits in certain areas may be instructed to prepare themselves further by the use of online modules or courses before coming to the *tutorial phase*, where they are guided by a professional faculty member in digesting, and integrating the core material into their thinking and practice. With the basic terminology and ideas in place before this phase begins, it can concentrate on the kinds of live experiences of discussion, role plays, case study explorations, etc., and above all, nuanced discussion with a top professional in the field. The face to face tutorial is then followed by an online *application phase* of 10 weeks or more, during which course participants can test and review their knowledge of what they have learned, discuss and receive coaching on the issues that arise for them in their application of learnings, and receive, as needed, additional information or resources from the faculty or course facilitators.

MCE's approach is well in synch with the new awareness of the importance of learning in context, taking greater control over one's own learning needs, and continuous learning over time. As e-learning guru Elliot Masie observes, "...the classroom takes on incredible power when it can be extended over time, with networks of access back to subject matter expertise, coaching and assessment." ["Learning Over Time – A More Natural Model" 2001, The MASIE Center, www.techlearn.com]

The vehicle MCE created to carry this effort to its destination is called the "eTrain." The eTrain is an online community platform that serves not only to meet client and participant needs in the online phases described above, but also serves as the meeting place of a community of practice for various groups involved in the ongoing design and development of e-learning.

Though its inhouse language is English, MCE's staff and faculty come from 47 countries and customers worldwide. The eTrain project faces a number of formidable challenges, educating faculty in how to create digital surround that is both pedagogically sound and culturally appropriate, refitting and reeducating existing approaches and personnel on how to market this new form of learning to a multicultural European and global clientele, and, of course, educating its clients in how to build, market internally, and benefit from the newly available tools and approaches to mastering management and business skills.

In addition a new role has appeared. Herman Coquel, Director of MCE's Business Applications Delivery describes it like this, "Facilitating on-line discussion forums clearly requires special skills, particularly in a multicultural online environment. Having trained on-line facilitators will be the primary key-success factor for the project. While it is not necessary that the facilitator is an expert in the subject-matter, she or he must be conversant with it as well as having the ability to recognize communication styles and learning patterns in other cultures. Above all he or she needs to have the ability to keep the discussion going on by stimulating every student to participate. A moderator or facilitator stimulates the discussion by raising challenging issues and puts participants back on track when the discussion is drifted from the subject. Fast-moving participants are given the challenge to coach their less-active co-students, which enhances the team-spirit and moves the whole class forward at the same pace." [online discussion 13.09.01]

Besides being a very timely solution to how to incorporate e-learning into one's core business, we think that MCE's organization and approach is a good example of the best European tendency of addressing diversity solidly in the context of a past, that has brought us to this point in history, with a full view of what is going on in the present and taking advantage of the possibilities found in fresh technology that will shape our global future.

Online support for diversity

This morning www.Google.com, our favorite search engine reported that it was searching 1,610,476,000 web pages, no doubt far, far fewer than when you are reading this line. The author of this article has been overwhelmed by the amount and quality of information, links, online courses and other resources available for pursuing diversity information and initiatives on the Internet. This revolution of information distribution calls into question the very nature of publishing books and journals on the topic of diversity and intercultural education. Because the

choices of media are so large and varied today, one has to ask, what is it that books and other print media do better that cannot be done via other media. What is the blended solution? While this is not the forum to discuss this question in detail, we feel that one of those things is our ability to open the eyes of those who have not yet explored the online resources for doing diversity work to the possibilities that the use of the Internet, intranets and extranets hold for them both in the information it can provide as well as in serving to support diversity initiatives.

For those unfamiliar with the distinctions, the *Internet* refers to the public network that is accessible to anyone with an online connection and a browser; intranets are similarly constructed pages that belong to a company or organization and are generally accessible only to authorized individuals or to the members or employees of the organization; *extranets* are websites that an organization creates for its customers or a specific group of outside users.

First, the *Internet*. The first thing to remember is that the Internet is a dynamic medium, an organism that reflects the dynamism of the world it represents. It is ever growing and changing--one of the reasons why it is necessary to restrict the URLs (Internet addresses) that we provide you to the home sites and more stable locations of the organizations and topics we refer to. Therefore it is important for those working in the intercultural and diversity field, to learn how to search for what they need. At www.Yahoo.com, another major search engine, for example, following the search path of "Home > Society and Culture > Issues and Causes > Multiculturalism >" provides hundreds of listings of Governmental services, NGOs, enterprises concerned with cultural diversity that is searchable on a country by country basis and in various languages, not just in Europe, but worldwide.

Secondly, *intranets*. Online support for diversity initiatives is becoming their second most important success factor to top management support for the implementation of the organizational change required to derive value from a diverse workforce. This support largely occurs on intranets where organizations can project the organization's commitment to diversity and develop its multicultural identity and image as well as disseminate information, manage diversity projects, create and sustain affinity and special interest groups, carry on discussions, poll their employees, manage expatriation and repatriation, and deliver e-learning for multicultural competence on a company-wide basis. The possibilities seem limitless and realizable as long as the organization makes the effort to both market their intranet to their stakeholders and construct a user-friendly environment that is truly of interest and use to their employees. The diversity parts of the intranet, generally speaking should be well integrated into the organizations online intranet and workspace to emphasize that culture and multiculturalism are an essential aspect of everything the organization does.

Finally, *extranets*. "Whereas an intranet resides behind a firewall and is accessible only to people who are members of the same company or organization, an extranet provides various levels of accessibility to outsiders. You can access an extranet only if you have a valid username and password, and your identity determines which parts of the extranet you can view."

[<http://www.pcwebopaedia.com/TERM/e/extranet.html>] Extranets provide organizations to project their diversity commitments to their partners and customers in the conduct of everyday business. They also offer a medium for such specific diversity projects as one is willing to share with others in terms of information and processes, such as diversity benchmarking.

Additional References

The European Commission's *eEurope 2002* website subtitled *An information society for all of Europe* is located at http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/index_en.htm and contains updates to the action plan and a benchmarking strategy on the use and quality of Internet access for key groups of the population.

eLearning: Designing tomorrow's education is the online home of the eLearning initiative of the European Commission. Its purpose is "to mobilise the educational and cultural communities, as well as the economic and social players in Europe, in order to speed up changes in the education and training systems for Europe's move to a knowledge-based society." It is found at <http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/elearning/index.html>

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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