

Migrations and the Net: new virtual spaces to build a cultural identity

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Summary

This paper presents some of the reflections, projects and results around the topics of multiculturalism and migration attained by the Educational Technology Research Group at the University of Murcia, some of them integrated in the Interuniversity Cooperation programmes promoted by the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECI). We pretend to analyze how the appropriate use of ICT in educational contexts allows to maintain the cultural characteristics of a community, while helping at the same time to promote a better knowledge and acceptance of other cultures.

Spanish current young immigrants (most of them first or second generation) are suffering different types of acculturation as a result of various factors, which are conditioning their lifestyle and relationship models within the host culture. Among these factors, the descendant acculturation and assimilation are two significant barriers towards achieving a society with a real and sustainable model of multicultural co-existence.

School is a very intense communicative environment for children, and in the primary stages it is the most significant space of interaction both to acquire the culture of the host society or for losing the original one, as well as for disseminating, understanding and accepting both.

We are living in a technological world which presents great opportunities to establish networks of communication and open our minds to relationships with other people and cultures. Our projects seek to provide answers through technology to all the challenges posed by the current realities of migration, using as a basis one of the most important elements in the adaptation of humans to their environment: education.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, ICT, Pedagogy, School, immigration, acculturation, adaptation

1 Introduction

As previous studies have demonstrated in other societies undergoing similar processes of migration, the current Spanish population of young immigrants (most of them first or second generation) are suffering different types of acculturation. These processes are the result of various diverse factors including social, economic, communicative and family. And these are conditioning their lifestyle and relationship models within the host culture.

Because of these factors, decedent acculturation and assimilation are significant barriers towards achieving the goal of society becoming a real and sustainable multicultural model of intercultural co-existence.

School is a very intense communicative environment for children, and in the primary stages is the space of interaction of most significance in acquiring the culture of the host society, losing the original culture, or disseminating, understanding and accepting both.

We therefore consider that building new means of communication and inter and intracultural links both within basic education and also with key people from their own and other cultures could present the opportunity to open more possibilities of conserving features of basic cultural identity while at the same time proposing a new definition of intercultural relationships which supports new, desirable social models based on strongly established cultural identities.

In addition we are living in a technological world which presents great opportunities to establish networks of communication. This could open our minds to relationships with other peoples and other cultures.

We are strongly convinced that the appropriate use of ICT in educational contexts could permit the maintenance of the cultural characteristics of one community while, at the same time, helping cultural interchange. This would allow a better knowledge and acceptance of other cultures.

2 Social Diversity in our Society

As previously stated, migration is a phenomena which has characterised humanity since its earliest times. One of the most recent theories of evolution says that “everyone is from Africa” With this statement the British researcher Spencer Well concludes that every human is a descendant of the ten thousand homo sapiens who migrated around the globe more than fifty thousand years ago.

The world today - as a survivor of countless declared or undeclared wars, and after much political and social restructuring - is facing a dual reality that is seriously compromising the future and welfare of the world population. On the one hand, the reality of the nation-state as a stable entity has been exposed as a fallacy, and cultural diversity is virtually unstoppable. On the other hand, the continuous wars of the last century, the processes of re-union between nations, and other "new unions" made by different countries, have made the concept of country less important. This concept has been replaced by the idea of socio-political "blocks" in considering the configuration of the world population (Huntington, 2003).

Talking about cultural diversity within a single virtual or geographical location, or talking about *multiculturalism* in our time is not new. According to the latest Human Development Report, (UNPD, 2005) the majority of the world's countries are currently culturally diverse. This diversity can be expressed in graphical form as follows:

Figure 2.1 Most countries are culturally diverse

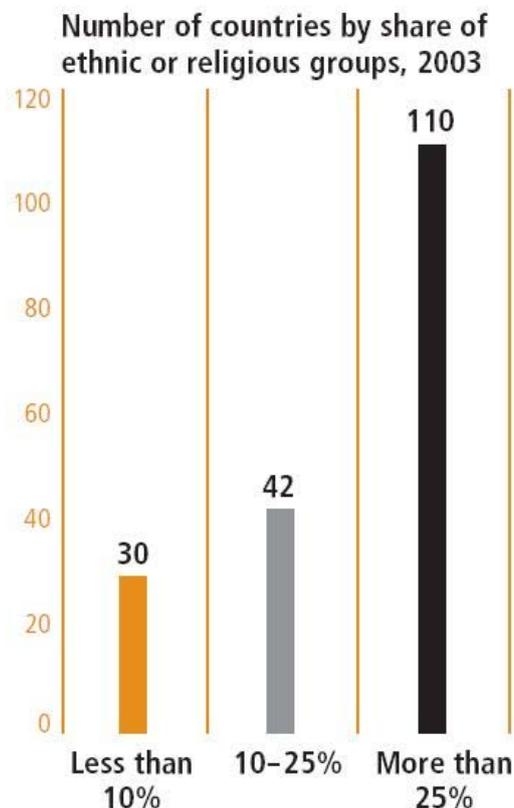


Figure. Cultural Diversity around the world (UNPD, 2005)

This diversity is a consequence of people who have been grouped into political divisions defined merely by lines drawn on a map. This means that people with different linguistic traditions, religions, and so on are encompassed in the same area. This situation means that the homogeneity of people, nation and culture is today more an exception than a rule in all countries.

Imperialist powers (identified with a single country), which in the past dominated the world - China, Rome, England, Spain and the United States- have become blocks of countries with various aspects in common- the EU, Southeast Asia, Latin America, etc.-. There are transnational realities that provide a global identity for people.

The two phenomena described above are not the only cause and effect of diplomatic action (or lack of diplomatic action to be exact). In recent times the phenomenon of migration, particularly migration for economic and political reasons, has contributed to an increase in multiculturalism in some societies. However, the conditions of immigrants, and their own need for new emotional, political, social and above all cultural references has helped these nuclear cultural identities merge into other transnational or block identities. These identities have the ability to empower immigrants in their new environments. (Portes, 2004)

3 Migration, culture and identity

Regardless of whether a concept of culture is based on the essentialist approach of the German Herder, or the procedural approach of Baumann (Baumann, G., 2001), we can identify a number of features that typify an ethnic group, a religion or a nation-state. This concept also necessarily includes a notion of society and relationships between those who are within society, as well as the meanings and beliefs of those with whom they live.

Culture -as a concept- is useful in identifying or merging, naturally or artificially, components of a particular ethnic group, religion or a state. Each of these three situations behaves, according to Baumann (Baumann, G., 2001) as a distinct culture with specific features. "People are discovering new identities, but also often old identities and walk resolutely under new flags, but often also older flags, leading to wars with new enemies, but often also old enemies." (Huntington, 2003:20). Both natives and foreigners are in a common place with a shared future, and whatever we have learned throughout history, about the identity of "our people" is no longer an immutable truth. Nevertheless, for each of us it is difficult to deal with this new situation with outdated "weapons".

Although people's migration around the world is as old as humanity, the truth is that, according to Van Dick (1997), studies about this are recent. Indeed studies of migrations have multiplied as migration has grown. Therefore, some countries have internalized their situation about migration a long time ago. They have been considering this for some time and on the international level, are opening new avenues of research on this subject.

On the research and consequent study about migrations made by Prof. Alejandro Portes (Director of Migrations and Development Observatory at the University of Princeton, United States), some specific areas have been remarked upon as "research frontier areas". Amongst these we can mention: Political incorporation of migrants to adopted countries as well as the migrants' birth countries, national communities in the different countries of Europe and The United States, communities of immigrants of 2nd or 3rd generation, acculturation and its consequent problems, segmented assimilation and descendent assimilation in these young people who were born in the reception countries, processes of formation and guarantee of the cultural identities in migrants, and so on (Portes, 2004; Portes y Hao, 2005).

The need for national policies to favour multiculturalism and the need to guarantee cultural identity for different people has been observed and studied from different perspectives. Nevertheless, in the Human Development Report 2004 (UNPD, 2005), the need to develop these kinds of identities has been studied in depth, and also in societies where the sense of

national identity is best recognized, and "nation" is a cohesive concept, but is also a concept which differentiates one person from another.

The existence and the importance of subjects that we have previously mentioned have been proved in some contexts, and have been proved also by influential groups which are nationally and Internationally recognized. They have also been variously described by immigrant organizations and researchers in different forums around the world. It is worth mentioning the work of Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991; Berry, 1990 and 1997; Fonet- Betancourt, 2003; Grimson, 2000; Navas, 1997; Navas, Pumares, Sanchez-Miranda et al., 2004; Navas, Garcia Rojas et al., 2004; Piastro, 2002; Zick, Wagner, Van Dick and Petzel, 2001 .

4 Our World Today: Globalization, Interculturalism or Sectarianism

According to Amando de Miguel (2000) "Foreign immigration becomes a problem from the moment it becomes socially visible." In fact, throughout time, Europe has seen a more or less constant flow of migration from the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the current situation in the rest of the world as regards security, famine and social welfare is now no longer an alien or invisible phenomenon. Indeed, if we look at the data (only focusing on the phenomenon of migration with which we are concerned in this work), the immigrant population of Spain has experienced an increase of 367.71% in recent years from 1996 to 2004, when it went from representing 1.35% of the total population of Spain, to becoming 4.59% of the total in 2004. In the period between 2004 and 2006 the total doubled and reached 9.95% of the total population¹.

In the world today, this new situation has forced more than half the world (in fact more than a half) to try to overturn the other half (in fact much less than a half) in search of a better life. This has prompted many different conflicts, including political conflicts between countries which send out their emigrants, transit immigration countries and hosts countries². Another conflict is the need to fill gaps in the legal and legislative places of origin and recipient countries³. Yet another is the social education of citizens (both native and newcomer) to make the best of the new social and cultural landscape in which they find themselves.

Nevertheless recipient countries need these people. There are many companies which could not survive without the work of these new people. Indeed, there is also a very intense contribution by newcomers in maintaining the productivity of the recipient countries; . To summarize briefly, between 1995 and 2005 Spain ranked first in terms of growth of the immigrant population with a rate of 8% compared to 3.5% in the Euro area as a whole and 3.7% in the Europe of fifteen. In addition, according to data from "El País" (2006) and confirmed by the economic daily journal "5 Días" (2007) this group of people brings about 8000 euros each year to fund Social Security. At the present time, for each immigrant pensioner there are 30 immigrants working. On the other hand for each Spanish pensioner this proportion falls to 1:3.

However, in addition to the economic advantages of these new situations created by population movements, these movements have made very distinct changes in the cultural identity of both

¹ Data provided by the National Statistics Office (INE) and the Spanish Ministry of Interior for the years 1996 to 2006 referred to people living in Spain without having been born within the country.

² For example, passage mass of people without immigration papers through the fence border between Spain and Morocco, led one of the worst diplomatic crisis which has pitted the government of Spain in what leads legislature, and spearheaded negotiations between the European Union territory as receiver, and in Morocco as a country of transit, and forced the achievement of regulatory agreements. (Source: Newspaper El Pais, ABC and El Mundo, September 2005)

³ At this point it is important to note that Spanish law knew no regulation whatsoever to the presence of foreigners in its territory by the year 1989 with the Order 22 February, the Ministry of the Interior, on *Means economic whose possession would prove foreigners in order to make their entry into Spain (Orden De 22 De Febrero, del Ministerio de Interior, sobre Medios económicos cuya posesión habrán de acreditar los extranjeros para poder efectuar su entrada en España)*, where the volume of immigration called for such legislation. But on the other hand, in several countries of Latin America, with high migration and massive inflow of foreign exchange from emigrants, are planning laws to facilitate and contribute to the entry and consolidation of these currencies in their countries.

migrants and the reception society. There is a daily effect on this, one of the vital major references which man has as a social being: his cultural identity.

Maintaining a cultural base and knowledge of roots of origin is difficult, especially in situations of permanent migration, and especially among individuals who are part of the second generation. They, who do not have a historical link with the culture of origin (have not lived there, and have no history there), are in the same situation both here and in their country of origin. They are considered outsiders. The only cultural link they have is from their parents (if present, and most are first-generation immigrants). They do not know from what perspective to address the culture of the place in which they live. They feel alienated from this new culture.

Countries such as The United States, which has more experience in large scale immigration have identified some social phenomena associated with immigration, which could be a cause of one of the most important challenges: the processes of *acculturation*. These can be defined as a total loss of cultural reference whether or not there is the assimilation of a new culture. In the same way, there is also *segmented assimilation*, which is the phenomenon by which children of immigrants will have a process of adaptation to their new society. This will depend directly on their parent's socio-economic potential and the environment in which they are offered more or less marginal trends - namely the socioeconomic segment their parents belong to. We can also identify *Decreasing assimilation*, which notes how, because of their poverty many of these migrants are established in central areas of cities close to " ghettos ", where native minorities reside and where their children often have to go to very poor schools. Here they can see the spectacle of daily deviant lifestyles generally associated with the drug culture" (Portes, 2004:14), leading, of course, to lower chances of success in adaptive processes.

Cultural identity is a multiple and dynamic reality. This identity is forged with the passage of years and is not dependent on colour or creed. It is imbued in the relations established between people. The concept of culture as dynamic concept is a very new concept (Mummert, 1999). Nevertheless this dynamic idea of culture is contrary to the ideas which are intrinsic to our understanding of society.

There is not a balance of influence in the world. Throughout history there has been a constantly shifting imbalance. The present time is no different and this imbalance still exists. It is established by orderly classification, and any hierarchical classification of cultures must include, by definition, the notion of mutual influence. This fact and the process of globalization means that dominant cultures can, if they have not already, stifle others.

Consequently, migrations and the construction of cultural identity in the new social environment, is today one of the biggest concerns of our world. Not without reason does "The Human Development Report 2004" published by the United Nations Office for Development (UNDP, 2005), relate in its initial thinking on a case "Cultural liberty in today's diverse world" that: "...democracy, equitable development and cohesion of the States are key factors, but there is also a need for multicultural policies that explicitly accommodate the cultural differences " (47).

Therefore, we firmly believe that to be able to build our future, the base from which to build it must be firm and well defined. It must be formed of the past and the present, and must profitably address this. In this way, the cultural identity of emigrants must be constructed and consolidated around two priorities. These are the historical culture of origin which must be clearly anchored, and the new culture in which they are integrating themselves and which they can only see critically with a strong own -cultural base.

5 Communication Networks: New tools in the service of New Challenges

Until now, we have been analyzing models that determine the processes of migrant adaptation to other contexts, always considering the face to face context. Nevertheless, given the undeniable technological advances which we are witnessing at the present time and the degree

of penetration of that progress in these societies, this is not the only context in which we are operating.

According to Echeverria (2000), a new social space for human relationships was created with the new ICT. He calls this space the "third environment". This requires that changes in society not only relate to it, but confront it. In addition these ICT tools can help in other processes of change. The third environment could be a new environment of relationships which has better rules governing it.

Today it is commonplace to say that new communication technologies are shaping new areas of significance and hence a new culture. This statement would not have the relevance it does if the process had occurred without cultural precedents.

Raising questions about how the Net can make a breakthrough in achieving a truly intercultural society implies we are conscious not only of the network itself, but also of the spirit of the network. A network which intersects so many people may affect not only the way in which people relate to each other through the computer, but also how they see each other, and even themselves.

If the Internet, in words of Baigorri (2000), is "a large and growing attachment to the environment, a living environment," it can be also a tool to facilitate the improvement of the physical environment and, through people's experience in cyberspace, can expand the borders of the vision of the real world which we have.

Continuing widespread claims commonly affirm that these technologies eliminate the space and time required for a process of communication in which communicators are not in the same location. To some extent this assertion is true, but on the other hand is also a fallacy because of the limitation on the meaning of the terms time and space. When we speak of this context of space and time, we think unconsciously, only of space and time associated with the concept of speed, which means we are over generalising.

Accepting off course, that the speed inherent to these technologies becomes irrelevant, as does the time required to establish a process of communication between two partners -regardless of the distance over which they are- consequently means this distance is unimportant. Space is also the environment surrounding the partners, physical space, and is not altered by technology. Similarly the time experienced by those living in it is unaltered.

Culture is something related to the environment and to the time in which you live, and communication processes are always established and built in a space of cultural significance in which each one exists. It seems clear that there is a certain level of conflict between the two meanings of the terms of space and time.

On the one hand, technologies allow communication processes and with it, allow a transfer of information with a coincidence of space and time between the two participants almost similar to the existing face to face in site communication. On the other hand, the two partners are involved in their own cultural space that they have not left.

For the process to be viable, it is essential reach a consensus on the use of a common code of significance in order to make the communication process viable. This will be mediated by the balance or imbalance between the two cultures proportional to worldwide social influences that they have at any particular time. This code will inevitably be loaded with the culture from which it comes.

The communication cyber spaces have the advantages of giving us an opportunity to learn about different cultures, regardless of how distant. This special characteristic is a wealth that must be exploited. Learning to respect other cultures must be one of the fundamental objectives of the application of these technologies to education. Knowledge must be linked to one's own

knowledge; a knowledge and identification of one's own culture, not in order to confront the other cultures, but in order to maintain one's own signs of identity. We must develop the necessary intellectual and cultural tools to take advantage of what communication technologies put at our disposal. People are not intellectually prepared to use these technologies. Consequently all these tools cannot be used by the majority of those who have access to them. The fascination of multiculturalism lies precisely in mutual enrichment. However, this does not prevent the weakest cultures gradually becoming more similar to the dominant cultures. It can, though slow down the process. Of course it is the ability to be able to judge our own cultural signs that makes us individual and give us our identities.

None of this means renouncing our own culture. It means that we must defend our cultural principles and criteria, and our signs of identity, not by confronting another culture, but by understanding it.

Multiculturalism could be a problem and could be a risk, but the crucial point is that it should be an opportunity to solve historical problems that in the past we have not been able to overcome. Possibilities offered by the ICT today go beyond mere speed technology or changes in the first order. The Cultural openness that networks can promote means not only a more open society and a society less tied to the personal, religious or cultural but can also help to work towards real multiculturalism in the classroom and in all walks of life. These processes should ideally cease to be a challenge and become normal. These processes must also promote that, once inside the aforementioned "third environment", we have a real equal status and also access to almost any culture and any individuals.

6 A Study and some conclusions

Following this line of research, in the Educational Technology Research Group at the University of Murcia, we have been working on various research projects for some time. These projects have been integrated into the programs for Interuniversity Cooperation which have been promoted by the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECI). Our projects seek to provide answers through technology to all of the challenges posed by the current realities of migration, using as a basis one of the most important elements in the adaptation of humans to their environment - education.

The first of these projects, carried out in 2007, has as a goal the construction of a model of a multicultural society which is more sustainable in the Spanish context. This model is based on the maintenance of the cultural identities of the people who are inhabiting our country, and is also based on the process of raising awareness of their cultures through the use of the potential of communication networks and ICT.

In this way, this project is aimed at improving the current status of school-age immigrants who are living in this region (Murcia) and specifically that of immigrants from Ecuador who constitute the largest numbers of immigrants in the region. According to the INE 2006 this is nearly 55700 people. We intend to explore how new technologies of Information and Communication will serve as a tool to maintain and enrich cultural identity. We will conduct an experiment in networking, and want to build Intra and Inter cultural links between secondary schools (both in the region as well as the country of origin), which promote the connection between students that will enable them to maintain their prior cultural reference (native) and lay the foundations of both their cultural heritage as well as others. In addition, of course, we want to raise awareness of other cultures amongst the existing population.

With the use of communication technology we can help immigrant students build a cultural bridge which allows them to construct their own cultural identity based on two main pillars: firstly their culture of origin which informs them but which is no longer experienced on a daily basis, and secondly the host culture into which they are being integrated and must ultimately fully belong to. This is a bid to share cultural experiences from two geographically separate cultures,

but which are close in many aspects. In this project immigrant students engaged in intense work as cultural mediators while at the same time taking advantage of such interaction.

For this we are supported by two renowned academic institutions (The University of Murcia in Spain and The Private Technical University of Loja in Ecuador) which will underpin the proposal from the point of view of the researcher. We also have strong support from four institutions of secondary education (2 Spanish and 2 Ecuadorian) and also have the invaluable support of The Centre for Teaching and Resource of Lorca (Spain), which is in direct relation to the work that we have done.

We have found, for example, there is more interchange between cultures that we predicted but there are some difficult aspects. On the one hand, most of our shops or supermarkets have some products from the other country like usual issues, and most of our students have tested some special food or product from the other country. In the same way, some different vocabulary from Ecuador is more and more common in our schools in Spain (especially about food). On the other hand, most of typical expressions from Ecuador have been conserved by immigrants (parents) but have disappeared from the normal language of immigrant children. The leisure time is still not share with Spanish people, parents are with Ecuadorians and children are some times with only Ecuadorians and some times with the other children.

The research project is still in progress. We are still finalizing details in Lorca and Murcia. We are now focusing our efforts on collecting information that will help us to have a greater idea of what the starting positions of our students are and how projects like these operate from the point of view of the participants. This will be done through the internet, through small-type goal questionnaires, supplemented by interviews with some of the subjects involved. Also included are the views of experts in the field, and of members of the school community in which participants and members of their families are involved.

Once we have collected these data, we will proceed to the analysis and evaluation of all of these data. With the results we will make a report in which we will include not only the different conclusions that are relevant in each case, but proposals for work and improvement for the future empowerment of the networks as a means of cultural affirmation in the schools.

7 Next Steps and new roads to explore

Communicative possibilities exist today. There is available access to a great deal of information. This is not always valuable qualitative information. Nevertheless, there is the possibility of exchanging information cheaply, and a possibility of maintaining relevant cultural knowledge. There also exists the possibility of a personal and intellectual enrichment which has never previously existed. All of these possibilities will remain little more than an existential reality if nobody is there to use it while taking into account the need to overcome the barriers that culture has placed on throughout history.

ICT and its potentials are facts. Multiculturalism is a growing reality. The union of these concepts is the cause of the growth of multiculturalism and is also one of the possible means of cultural development. However we must learn the correct use of these concepts and find the paths to using them correctly. This is the intention of the work that we have done and are presently doing.

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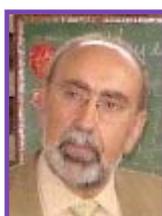
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