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Intercultural Communication and Online Course Support in Trinidad and Tobago

Marc Bragdon

abstract: This article discusses how intercultural communication theory informed an approach to information literacy support for the University of New Brunswick's online MEd program in Trinidad and Tobago. By applying established frameworks for understanding and comparing cultural values across national groups, the author designed and implemented a hybrid support model that combines in-person workshops with regular online contact. The aim of this approach is to establish a context in which the motivations and learning preferences of students and support personnel are mutually acknowledged prior to navigating the online learning environment.

Introduction [A head]

In research literacy workshops in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and Scarborough, Tobago, I like to run through, by way of introduction, a PowerPoint show of pictures of the University of New Brunswick (UNB) Fredericton campus in late summer and winter. I then show pictures of the IT (information technology) Help Desk and Research Help Desk staffs, people the students might encounter online should technical or research questions arise. I finish by sharing some of my own academic research interests. This is particularly appropriate because these students are, in fact, the focus of my research.

I start by drawing a comparison between our two cultures (Canadian and Trinbagonian) using bicycle safety as a working example: in Canada, bicycling without a helmet can incur a

\$25 fine and, while not everyone likes it, nearly everyone complies. In contrast, if Trinidad and Tobago had a similar law, the fine might be more on the order of \$10,000 in Trinidad and Tobago dollars (approximately \$2,000 Canadian), and yet hardly anybody would comply.

What does this say about our respective countries, I ask them? “We Trinidadians have a different view of life” is a common response. Whatever conclusions are drawn, no one objects to the comparison, and most seem to find it both true and amusing. But in the end, it is a trick question. The comparison says little that is useful about either culture. It merely exposes surfaces. What lies underneath those surfaces is, for the time being, hidden. This comparison has little or no deeper value in terms of understanding each other’s cultures. That I have even picked this example probably says more about my values than it does about Trinbagonians.

Intercultural Communication and Global Higher Education [A head]

The library literature has begun to recognize the importance of personal interaction in library support of offshore university programs as a means of bridging cultural and experiential differences.¹ But few authors have written about how to establish sound contexts for working with people from another culture. An examination of how intercultural communication theory intersects with globalization trends in higher education provides some indication of how to proceed.

Intercultural communication is the study of communication across cultures.² Although culture itself is an abstract, multidimensional concept, broadly speaking, cultures consist of shared values or standards for functioning within a given society.³ Gabrielle Ford and Paula Kotzé further elaborate that culture can be viewed as a set of core values and patterns of thinking that influence how people communicate among themselves and through cultural artifacts, such as tools or works of art.⁴

Beginning with the American anthropologist Edward Hall's pioneering work in the 1950s, intercultural communication took root as a practical discipline concerned with how to function in the emerging global context of the postwar era.⁵ It later blossomed in business studies with the influential work of the Dutch social psychologist and industrial anthropologist Geert Hofstede, among others.

Hall's and Hofstede's works (discussed later in more detail) were concerned with identifying "national" or "ethnic" cultural dimensions and elaborating their implications for communication. Both scholars ultimately wanted to set intercultural working relationships in a context of mutual understanding.

Culture, a concept once associated mainly with anthropology and "exotic" ethnic groups, has come to mean the defining characteristics of any social group that exhibit cohesive behaviors worthy of study.⁶ As such, we can talk of professional, religious, ethnic, national, and many other types of cultures. Cultures deeply inform social interactions and tend to overlap according to the multiple roles individuals assume in their everyday lives.

Hence, intercultural dealings consist of interacting and overlapping identities.⁷ I, for example, am a mix of several cultural identities, including Canadian, Caucasian, bilingual, librarian, musician, and teacher. Trinbagonian students might be any number of ethnicities or blends of nationalities, professions, and other identities. Interactions generate a new "middle culture" of dealing in which individuals take on commingling identities, while creating and acting out new roles.⁸

Cultures tend to evolve over time due to internal pressures as well as intercultural contact.⁹ **In globalized higher education initiatives, previously prohibitive geographic and technological boundaries have all but disappeared.** While there is considerable debate around the

agendas and outcomes of contemporary globalization, we can perhaps agree on Philip Altbach's definition as it applies to education, where globalization represents "the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement."¹⁰ Perhaps a more apt term to use in framing these forces is the internationalization of higher education, which by its name implies a crossing of national identities and cultures.¹¹ As global economic patterns and labor force mobility redefine the meaning of national boundaries, they compel higher education to hold graduates to international standards that are cocreated, broadly endorsed, and ever-evolving.

The push to internationalize higher education owes much to the irrepressible gains and promises of one group of especially potent contemporary cultural artifacts: information communication technologies (ICT).¹² Thanks to ICT, populations around the world can take advantage of globally accredited learning opportunities via "e-learning" to obtain advanced competencies quickly, flexibly, and at reasonable cost. Education providers can, in turn, repurpose existing curricula to deliver them through online learning management systems for a modest investment.

Whether we call it *globalization* or *internationalization*, exporting educational programs via ICT requires careful consideration of methods and content. Davoud Masoumi and Berner Lindström situate e-learning as a cultural artifact infused with characteristics of the designing culture, from the types of pedagogies preferred to the built-in cultural expectations and values.¹³ How well these suit the destination or client culture is a matter of debate.

Since the source cultures engaged in the business of internationalizing education are most often North American, European, or Australian, Western models of academic writing and research have become the de facto international standard.¹⁴ Some scholars warn of a resultant

commodification of learning and draw parallels between the attendant pedagogical bias and neocolonialism, in which developed countries dominate less-developed ones by economic and cultural means rather than by direct political control.¹⁵

Besides implied imbalances, there are basic communication issues to consider in online teaching and learning. As Gary Mersham argues, the now highly favored collaborative-constructivist model of learning, in which students and instructors teach one another and learners construct their own knowledge by testing ideas based on their prior knowledge and experience, operates by means of dialogue and cocreation of meaning.¹⁶ It relies heavily on multidirectional communication.

According to communication theory, the common denominators for all communicative transactions are the contexts (often multiple and overlapping) in which they take place. Together, educators and learners do their best to understand, articulate, and otherwise navigate these contexts in all their intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and intercultural aspects.¹⁷ Virtual settings pose interesting challenges because the social dimension—previously defined by personal presence and physical space—is radically altered.¹⁸ Different cultural groups and individuals within these groups may have different kinds and levels of experience in these new contexts.

What seems clear from a high-level survey of global e-learning is that the terrain is still largely unmapped and up for grabs. If provider and client cultures or teachers and learners are to share territory equitably, then mapping needs to be a group effort.

Relational and Co-Constitutional Learning [A head]

Mikko Vesisenaho and Patrick Dillon bring an ecological perspective to mapping the future of e-learning with their CATI (contextualize, apply, transfer, import) model for implementing ICT in

education.¹⁹ Cultural ecology presupposes people and their environments are mutually transformative. In education, these transformations are either *relational* (that is, related to predetermined circumstances and outcomes) or *co-constitutional* (that is, emergent in the moment of engagement between teachers and learners, with less predictable outcomes). Institutions such as universities focus predominantly on relational learning, and so the pedagogy and content of e-learning tend to relate primarily to the source cultures in which they developed.

People solve problems and adapt and modify lessons to accord with their situations. Whatever the original intentions—that is, the source context—of relational learning, it will change through local contextualization. Profound changes are inevitable as learning is transferred and contextualized into the cultural ecology of new learning environments.²⁰ It follows that, **for e-learning to best serve client populations, it must incorporate co-constitutional—that is, cocreated—elements.**

Bolanie Olaniran understands the co-constitutional approach in terms of return on investment—terms that university administrators generally favor—arguing that optimum returns for both school and student in online education require that educators accommodate the learning needs and preferences of different cultures.²¹ Cultural diversity itself can be leveraged in tackling many of the challenges facing the global community.²²

Northern Exposure [A head]

The author's early career posting as systems librarian for public libraries in the northern Canadian territory of Nunavut sparked his interest in the intersection of library support and cultural context. While a specific set of skills (technical especially) got him the job, it quickly became clear that an entirely different order of skills and understanding would be necessary to address the glaring disconnect between remotely managed technologies and local use.

For example, the author was responsible for remotely supporting technologies at 10 branch libraries spread across a vast geographic expanse. Early interactions with local librarians by telephone or e-mail proved largely futile in tackling even the most basic tasks: fixing printers, updating software, recovering or resetting passwords, and troubleshooting network and computer problems. What should have been simple matters to negotiate instead called to mind a dance between partners listening to different music.

Before long, the author had to fly to host communities as part of a mandate to assess and address technology needs across the library system. Given the relative isolation of these communities, people were usually glad to see a new face, and there was ample time and opportunity to discuss their libraries and their communities. Soon, the author became better acquainted with the librarians, library patrons, and community leaders and felt better positioned to grapple with the everyday challenges these communities and their libraries faced.

Without the community visits, the job might have continued as a string of frustrating e-mail threads, perplexing telephone conversations, and little measurable progress. Real progress lay in understanding personally what it means to run a library in an isolated northern community, and this understanding would not have happened without being there. There was no way to learn how to communicate effectively with the librarians without getting to know them personally and living with them in their environment.

After the community visits, things got done—together. The librarians understood what their systems librarian needed from them, and they knew they would have his ear and understanding when needed. Communication and collaborative efforts in the North followed a logic and trajectory of their own that required an adjustment in the author's expectations and behaviors.

Though the author was hardly aware of intercultural communication theory at the time, much of what he had learned could be expressed in established terms. What Edward Hall would have called high versus low context cultural differences were, for example, at play in interactions with community librarians.²³

High context cultures, to which the Inuit might be said to belong, assume considerable shared, implicitly known information in their interactions. As a result, the Inuit might say that a computer is “broken” rather than describe its symptoms.²⁴ They were not receptive to constant requests for clarification. Sometimes I did not learn that there were substantial problems with the installations until I saw them for myself.

“Southerners” (the migrant white-collar workers in the North) cling to our low-context norms in our manner of communication. Southerners spell things out, comparatively, and assume little prior knowledge of a situation. When two people inhabit different sides of the high/low context divide, we can expect miscommunication. Experience certainly attested to this fact.

The high/low context dance of opposites is not unique to this situation. This dynamic does not operate exclusively in what we think of as national or ethnic cultures. The differences can extend across various roles. A variation on the theme is the iconic library “reference interview,” in which the librarian tries to clarify the user’s need for information and direct him or her to the appropriate resources.

Referencing Geert Hofstede’s influential work on dimensions of national culture, Inuit cultural values tend to the low end of the low/high power distance spectrum.²⁵ *Power distance* refers to the degree to which those people in a society who hold less power will tolerate inequalities in terms of power distribution.²⁶ If we accept that Southerners are, in comparison, high power distance people—that is, highly hierarchical people—then we can detect another

potential source of misunderstanding. Withholding communication, for example, may have been a means by which the Inuit librarians expressed their autonomy in intercultural interactions with Southern colleagues, the author included.²⁷ By spending considerable time with the librarians and by allow them to lead change initiatives and take ownership of much of the regular maintenance previously reserved for site visits, relations began to normalize.

The biggest lesson was that context determines perspective. Coming to know a patron's or a colleague's cultural context—talking to people in their home environments and learning something of their challenges and aspirations, their communication styles, and their personal preferences—goes far in building productive relationships.

UNB's Distance Education: Trinidad and Tobago [A head]

Early in the author's current role as distance learning and Faculty of Education librarian at the University of New Brunswick's Fredericton campus, he found himself facing challenges like those he had encountered in the North. It was common, for example, to field an e-mail query such as "I am having trouble finding information on assessment" from our MEd students based in Trinidad and Tobago and have them drop the thread as soon as clarifications were requested. It was reminiscent of exchanges with librarians in Nunavut, which could begin (and often end) with an e-mail explaining: "Nothing is working here."

While students expect answers of their liaison librarian, a big part of the job involves helping students ask better, more pointed questions. A properly formed question goes a long way toward revealing the right research strategies. And getting students to pose the right question entails a conversation that, especially online, may require several e-mails or chats. It was not immediately evident, however, how to establish the proper context in which this could happen. The territory was murky, and there was no map.

Background [A head]

In partnership with the University of the West Indies ROYTEC campus in Port of Spain, UNB provides online programs in education at the bachelor's and master's level to residents of Trinidad and Tobago. (The Port of Spain campus is known as ROYTEC because it was originally operated by the Royal Bank of Canada.) Trinbagonian BEd candidates usually hold two-year diplomas from a teachers' college. MEd candidates have nearly all gone through the BEd program at either UNB or the University of the West Indies Saint Augustine campus in Trinidad and Tobago. All work as teachers, several in leadership roles, and they bring to their studies a palpable desire to improve their education system. Degrees are offered asynchronously online, though BEd courses include an initial weeklong in-class immersion with UNB faculty at one of the University of the West Indies ROYTEC campus locations.

Literature on the internationalization of higher education identifies intercultural engagement as one of the key drivers in the effective development and delivery of curricula at a distance and across cultures.²⁸ Although the internationalization of curricula implies common goals across cultures, assumptions and expectations regarding pedagogy and attendant processes may vary significantly from one country to another. Tying pedagogy and research literacy instruction with the lived experiences of students becomes crucial.

Winter 2010 [A head]

UNB Libraries had not previously been an active partner in the university's initiatives to spread distance education across the globe. Recognizing the university's desire to better serve international students and to expand its capacity to deploy further programs, the author proposed to the administration of both the libraries and the Faculty of Education a fact-finding mission to

Trinidad that would involve focus groups, interviews, and surveys of students. The goals were to learn more about:

- What research resources students use for their coursework,
- Their awareness and use of UNB Libraries resources specifically, and
- Specific and general challenges to conducting coursework.

The survey instrument and focus group questions appear in the Appendix.

The author visited Trinidad and Tobago's University of the West Indies-ROYTEC campus the first week of the winter semester in December 2010 to administer the survey to a mix of BEd and MEd students and to conduct two focus groups of six and eight MEd students, respectively. Even more than the actual results, the research process itself contributed to subsequent strategies for engaging with the students.

With the lessons of Nunavut still fresh, the author explored the country on his own before the research began. For a week, he traveled across both Trinidad and Tobago, mingling with the local population and taking in the sights and sounds. The solo adventure afforded an opportunity to confront things that seemed strange there and his personal reactions to them.

Habit and necessity create expectations in intercommunication that come into sharp relief in travel situations. Service transactions, small talk, and "conventional wisdom" become strange territories as the newcomer tries to process the unfamiliar. **Navigating novel situations requires less knowledge than curiosity because situations constantly change, and meanings are fluid.** This phase of the trip could be labeled "guerrilla ethnography," so named for the quick, nonsystematic approach to observing behavior in random, real-world settings.²⁹ Such observations had little or no rigor, scientific or otherwise, but the research phase arguably benefited from firsthand acclimatization and from confronting the researcher's cultural biases.

Research Findings [A head]

What stood out most in surveying and speaking with Trinbagonian teachers in training was their commitment to juggling their private, professional, and academic lives and to applying what they learn to make their schools better and improve learning for their students. Their passion surpassed what the author typically encountered. For assignments and papers, they naturally prized regional literature, but such sources proved elusive, as shown by the following comments:

When I did my research, there was a lot of foreign links and applying it to the Trinidad context means that you have to do a lot of thinking on your own to kind of connect, connect. But there's a lot of research done by educational researchers here and that's not available. So if UNB could make that available as well.

Local experience. What about research work from maybe Trinidad but some other countries around the world with people sharing similar experiences?

If you're doing research here you want to continue from what was already done because it could be quite embarrassing to jump in with something that you think is a newfound thesis. And then discover how many other people already presented that argument.

While awareness of library resources is mixed at the best of times, the education students in Trinidad and Tobago had little awareness of the breadth and depth of resources available to them. Our finding aids appeared rarely, if at all, on their radar. They relied heavily on what could be learned from former students (who were often teaching colleagues) and would call on friends who had been or might presently be engaged in postsecondary research. These social networks were at least as important to their success as the resources available through UNB Libraries:

I can start with a fanciful thought. I would love to go somewhere on the internet to search Google, ERIC, and UNB Libraries together rather than have to be fishing around and searching, just to get one article.

Are there copies of books online at UNB Libraries?

How would we request [an article UNB does not own] through the library (vs. pay for as they sometimes have). Who would we . . . I guess definitely we need someone to tutor us on how to request.

One comment was echoed time and again:

Let me just say, as a Trinidadian student I would love to find some avenue to get a glimpse into life on campus. Photographs, posts, I get the newsletter but I want to just get to see things because I'm an online learner. You know I'm a little bit isolated from that and I would love to see. I'm always trying to find out what the mascot is, you know.

Both focus groups invariably devolved into informal question-and-answer sessions that discussed specific services addressing the concerns raised. The sessions, ostensibly intended to gather information, seemed like an effective and welcomed conversation where we learned from one another what mattered most to each group.

Dimensions of Culture: Hall, Hofstede, and Beyond [A head]

The foundational modeling of cultural differences is indebted to two researchers: Edward T. Hall, a mid-twentieth-century anthropologist who published pioneering research on behavioral orientations and communication styles across national cultures; and Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social scientist who elaborated a framework of cultural dimensions intended for application in international business milieus. Hall began his field research on Native American reservations and then studied cultures throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. He described many cultural dimensions informing the communication style of individuals within a society.³⁰ *Dimension* in this context should be understood as an aspect of culture that can be measured relative to other cultures.³¹ Briefly, these aspects include:

- Proxemics: the nonverbal use of space and spatial boundaries as an elaboration of culture;

- High and low context: the degree to which underlying context is assumed or understood in communication; and
- Monochronic versus polychronic time: orientation toward time as either linear and fixed or momentary and malleable.³²

Hofstede proposed a set of national cultural dimensions based on data gathered from countries around the world and first applied to international management practices. These dimensions include:

- Power distance: the degree to which people are comfortable with uneven distribution of authority;
- Uncertainty avoidance: how well people deal with the novel or the unknown;
- Individualism/collectivism: orientation toward self or community; and
- Masculinity/femininity: whether relationships and quality of life are valued over materialism and success or vice versa.³³

Hofstede likened culture to mental software, a “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.”³⁴ This software originated with the society into which an individual was born and raised. Later, the individuals themselves revised the software, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on genetics and personality.

Table 1 shows how Canadians and Trinbagonians compare across several national cultural dimensions, according to survey data analysis from Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede’s 2005 publication *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. See Table 1.

[Table 1]

Not accounting for individual differences, which Hofstede took pains to acknowledge,³⁵ his data suggest that the gulfs in our respective national characters are not especially broad across all dimensions. This corresponds with findings from Betty-Jane Punnett's research into cultural values in the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean, which have a shared Commonwealth heritage.³⁶ Using an alternative set of measures represented by the Cultural Perspectives Questionnaire to assess preferred managerial styles in three Caribbean countries, Punnett draws a distinction between an emerging society with cultural preferences not incompatible with North American culture in terms of hierarchy and adaptability and a persistent neocolonial legacy of authoritarianism and resistance to change.

The greatest gulf appears in individualism versus collectivism. Trinbagonians are far more collectively oriented as a nation than Canadians. As Hofstede and Hofstede point out, Hall's high/low context dimension of communication aligns closely with individual/collective cultural orientation: the more collective a society, the more a high-context style of communication is the norm.³⁷ The student's comment about desiring more tangible connections to UNB might speak to a Trinbagonian's preferences for a high context culture—for example, a wish for more substantial associations.

Much of what the author learned from traveling the country and speaking with teachers evoked this dimension of Trinbagonian experience: there is a context to daily life and interpersonal dealings that outsiders can find challenging to penetrate. The only way to truly grasp that context is to become a part of it.

Aboriginal cultures are, by and large, more collectively oriented than Eurocentric ones. As a result, in initial dealings online, context falls short of what is necessary for effective working relationships between strangers from different cultural backgrounds.³⁸ Western and

European cultures tend to be low-context, since we expect explicit elaboration of context within instances of communication. So, for example, in an e-mail exchange between two people who share low-context cultural preferences, it is common to explicitly report details and state expectations. High/low context differences had to be accounted for in online interactions with Trinbagonian students.

Hofstede's pioneering work has been criticized for its binary depiction of "cultural dimensions" and for oversimplifying their effects without considering individual differences in personality, not to mention the complex and evolving nature of national cultures.³⁹ While subsequent models of cultural dimensions might depict a spectrum of cultural dimensions and complexities,⁴⁰ these do not necessarily invalidate Hofstede's attempts to classify national "characters." Trinidad and Tobago is a case in point, where modernity and tradition exist side by side. The MEd students adjust quickly to UNB's constructivist pedagogy, in which students actively participate in problem-solving and critical thinking, despite having grown up in a largely rote-based educational tradition. Their nation is attempting a vast cultural shift while seeking to leverage and preserve much of what is best in its collective character.

Study Recommendations [A head]

Out of this trip came a discussion document for both the library and Faculty of Education with recommendations for how the two units might work together to address support challenges.

General recommendations included:

- Generating more awareness of library services among students;
- Creating usable, contextual finding aids; and
- Establishing more context between students and the librarian.

These recommendations are arguably useful to other librarians acting in online support capacities where intercultural dimensions exist. Acting on the recommendations, one might consider setting up a distance education blog (a student recommendation from the focus groups), as the author has. The blog could post screencast videos and quick tips for using library resources specific to common assignments or to challenges students individually mention.

Familiarity with the history and cultural norms of client countries is critical. The author, for example, read all he could on the history of Trinidad and Tobago and its education system. These readings led to more study on education in postcolonial settings, intersections with globalization, and local and regional reform movements. He obtained an e-subscription to one of the national newspapers to keep abreast of events in Trinidad and Tobago and to gain a better sense of the local rhetoric.

The following semester, the author became an embedded librarian in the Trinidad and Tobago section of the Research Methods course MEd students take at the beginning of their degree. His role was to participate in discussions dealing with literature searching and to make himself available when questions came up. The embedded experience confirmed what the earlier research had revealed, particularly the challenges posed by personal time constraints, lack of familiarity with database searching and academic literature, burgeoning analytical skills, and limited access to regionally relevant information. The experience also highlighted some unexpected difficulties. Tellingly, the only students who would ask questions unprompted were those the author had met in person during the research trip.

Onsite Workshop Model [**A head**]

Based on the author's experience and on informal conversations with several Faculty of Education professors familiar with the BEd and MEd programs at the UNB, Trinidad and

Tobago, further work would be required to address the research support needs of these students. The author proposed a return engagement to Trinidad and Tobago to host daylong research orientation and skills workshops for the MEd students. While framing the rationale for the workshops in terms of research findings, it was also important to cite strategic institutional concerns. In a competitive education market, institutional performance is increasingly tied to tangible quantitative outcomes,⁴¹ including student completion and retention rates. Distance learning programs generally experience lower levels of retention and completion than traditional face-to-face programs.⁴² One is compelled to wonder, then, what factors within an institution's control might contribute to higher rates of retention.

Competitive markets also compel some universities to improve programs through quality assurance measures.⁴³ Effective quality assurance programs often address such processes as faculty development and student support services. Orientation processes can play a pivotal role, and if face-to-face and online mechanisms can blend in the service of learning goals, they should be fully explored.⁴⁴ Therefore the author proposed to provide the students with an opportunity to meet their librarian—and one another—face-to-face for one day before the beginning of the term. Such meetings would enable the students to set clear, cocreated contexts for their success in carrying out graduate-level research. The Faculty of Education agreed to the approach and funded the first of many such work trips in August 2012, two weeks prior to the fall semester for incoming students.

Return to Trinidad and Tobago [A head]

In late summer 2012 and every subsequent summer, the author has traveled to Trinidad and Tobago to hold one-day sessions for incoming students to the M.Ed. program introducing them

to library-abetted research. After the first trip, additional sessions were added for advanced students embarking on their capstone action research project.

While the workshops have evolved based on experience and feedback accrued, the components remain the same:

- Providing hands-on experience using a variety of research tools both on the student's own and in collaboration with classmates;
- Working with the students' research questions: connecting with what school-related issues matter most to them individually and collectively and then articulating and situating these questions in a broader research context; and
- Establishing relationships with and between students over the course of a day filled with formal and informal interactions.

Each session begins with an introduction or update depending on the author's research, since it functions as both an illustration of the research process and an icebreaker for generating conversation around topics of interest to attendees as both teachers and students.

The author also attempts to bring something of his own personality and culture to proceedings in a manner situated within what Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde, and John Kullman call the "middle culture of dealing."⁴⁵ As a musician, he performs ukulele interpretations of Trinbagonian calypsos at break time, with UNB paraphernalia as prizes for those students who could name the tunes. This contest invariably turns into impromptu singalongs that seem to bring people closer together.

These sessions were not just an opportunity for students to get to know their librarian and vice versa, but often their first opportunity to meet one another and work on academic-related exercises prior to the commencement of courses and group work online. The aim is to have

students reflect deeply on a question of direct importance to them as educators and then deconstruct their question to clarify how the parts interrelate. They then develop search strategies that work well with online databases. Time is spent discussing how to find regionally relevant literature (leveraging such tools as Google Scholar and UWISpace, the University of the West Indies institutional repository). The students also consider whether research conducted in circumstances parallel to Trinidad and Tobago—in other postcolonial or small island settings, for example—might apply to their research.

Students make extensive use of worksheets provided, and at the end of the day these are captured digitally with a smartphone. These worksheets include their e-mail addresses. Once back in Fredericton, the author might take an hour or two to start an e-mail discussion with the student on his or her topic and to provide suggestions for further refining the research question and developing search strategies.

Conclusion [A head]

While e-learning helps scores of people around the world attain the knowledge and credentials to better their lives and their communities, it is not in itself a panacea for addressing the challenges inherent to balancing local and global needs. As Zha Qiang states, internationalization is a dynamic process rather than a set of isolated activities.⁴⁶

Reading up on the history and current events of a client country can aid in understanding national and regional discourses. Researching best practices in library distance support contribute to effective interventions as well. None of these substitutes, however, for spending time on the ground with the students. As Hofstede and Hofstede assert, “Culture is the unwritten book with rules of the social game that is passed on to newcomers by its members, nesting itself in their minds.”⁴⁷ The closer the proximity, the better the reading.

Hybrid support models that combine face-to-face sessions with regular online contact help establish cocreated contexts that serve a truly internationalized educational agenda. The cultural middle space of dealing alluded to earlier resists definition. It thrives on mutual curiosity and respect. We owe this much to our students and ourselves as we continue to map an increasingly complex, if shrinking, world.

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire [A head]

This anonymous survey asks you to **describe and consider how you conduct research for courses**. Our intention is to build research services and tools, such as online videos and lectures that will address how to locate and evaluate the usefulness of materials such as articles, websites, books, etc. Please consider that **we are not evaluating you here**. We ask only that you be honest in your appraisal of educational experiences. All information you provide is confidential and will contribute to how we offer new tools and services. Thank you for your time.

Demographic data:

Age _____

Gender (male/female) _____

Previous academic experience _____

Motivation for taking degree courses:

Instructions:

Many questions below ask you to “**Rate from 1 – 5**”. This rating scale is understood as so:

1 – Not at all important or useful

2 – Hardly ever important or useful

3 – Sometimes important or useful

4 – Often important or useful

5 – Very important or useful

Section 1: Sources

- The following sources are important to my course work (Rate from 1–5; see first page for instructions)
 - UNB [University of New Brunswick] Libraries resources _____
 - Public library resources _____
 - The Internet _____
 - Communication with friends _____
 - Instructor-supplied via Blackboard _____
- Some of the other resources I use include (please specify):

- The following types of materials are important to my coursework (Rate from 1–5; see first page for instructions):
 - Books _____
 - Textbooks _____

- Blackboard discussions _____
- Readings posted or linked in Blackboard _____
- Electronic books _____
- Journal articles _____
- Newspaper or magazine articles _____
- Television or radio broadcasts _____
- Websites _____

Some of the databases and/or search engines I have used to complete assignments and projects include (please specify):

I consider the following criteria as important in determining the trustworthiness or credibility of sources (Rate from 1–5; see first page for instructions):

- The author’s credentials (profession, reputation, etc.) _____
- The publication’s reputation _____
- Date of publication _____
- URL domain (for example, websites ending in .edu, .gov, .org, .tt) _____
- Type of publication (magazine article, book, journal article, website) _____
- Result ranking (where results appear on a list of search results) _____
- Where it was obtained (from instructor, friend, Internet, etc.) _____
- Whether there are included references _____
- Whether there is a statement attesting to the validity of the information _____

Overall I feel that I have access to all the resources I need to successfully complete coursework (Rate from 1–5; see first page for instructions): _____

Section 2: Access and search strategies

When searching for resources using a database or web search engine, the following strategies are important to me (Rate from 1–5; see first page for instructions):

- Quotations for phrases (e.g., “mathematics anxiety”) _____
- Follow-up searches with synonyms (e.g., assessment, testing, quizzes, etc.) _____
- Controlled vocabularies (e.g., assigned subject headings in databases) _____
- Search operators (AND, OR, NOT) between words _____
- Limiting to specific Web domains (.edu, .gov, .tt, .org, .com) _____

Section 3: Reaching out

The following people’s input and assistance is important to my coursework (Rate from 1–5; see first page for instructions):

- Schoolmates _____
- Instructors _____
- Mentors _____
- Librarians _____
- Family _____
- Other (please specify)

Overall I am satisfied with the support I receive from others in completing coursework (Rate from 1–5; see first page for instructions) _____

Section 4: Obstacles in coursework

On average, how many hours in a week are spent on one course (please circle only one answer):

- 0–1

- 2–3
- 4–5
- More than 5

These circumstances are sometimes obstacles to my success in completing coursework (please circle as many answers as apply):

- Available time
- Family commitments
- Familiarity with technology such as Blackboard
- Familiarity with Internet search engines and databases
- Reliability and speed of Internet connection
- Lack of hands-on resources for certain subjects; please feel free to explain:

- Institutional/learner/research support; please feel free to explain:

- Language of instruction
- Isolation from other learners
- Other (please specify)

Overall I am satisfied with my circumstances and success in completing coursework (Rate from 1–5; see first page for instructions) _____

Is there a question you would like to have been asked about your educational experience? If so, please list and take this opportunity to answer.

Focus Group Questions [A head]

Please describe a typical assignment that requires literature searching: what resources do you consult, what strategies do you employ, and what are some of the challenges encountered?

What is your experience (if any) of consulting the UNB Libraries website and subscribed online resources for coursework?

What criteria do you apply to evaluating information, either in print or online?

What resources do you rely on and recommend to your own students for their assignments?

What are the associated challenges?

How would you characterize your experience with UNB online learning? What could we be doing to enrich your experience?

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Table 1.
Cross-country comparison on dimensions of culture*

| Country | Power distance† | Uncertainty avoidance‡ | Individualism§ | Masculinity** |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Canada | 39 (60/74) | 48 (60–61/74) | 80 (4/74) | 52 (33/74) |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 47 (54/74) | 55 (51/74) | 65 (65–66/74) | 58 (22–24/74) |

*The first number in each column represents the nation's score on a given dimension of culture. Higher scores indicate a higher occurrence of the dimension. For example, Canada has a higher incidence of individualism than Trinidad and Tobago. The numbers in parentheses indicate the nation's rank out of 74 nations surveyed, with multiple rankings indicating equal scores among nations.

†Power distance expresses the extent to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

‡Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which individuals of a society are comfortable with uncertainty and the unknown.

§Individualism can be defined as a preference for a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their families.

**Masculinity is the trait that emphasizes ambition, acquisition of wealth, and differentiated gender roles.

From Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005).

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