

## SOCIAL NETWORKING BEHIND STUDENT LINES WITH MIXI

STEVE MCCARTY  
*Osaka Jogakuin College, Japan*  
<waoe@wilmina.ac.jp>

### ABSTRACT

In a cross-cultural educational context with EFL students in Japan, the presenter sought to enhance integrative motivation through a supplementary online dimension. The social networking service (SNS) Mixi allowed the presenter to go behind the lines into student territory. Negotiating with three 2007 classes where most students belonged to Mixi seemed to result in disparate outcomes. Analysis of the results will be shown to necessarily go deeper than technological factors.

### INTRODUCTION

The presentation introduced the Japanese language interface of Mixi through translated illustrations and a YouTube video made in a Computer Communication class in authentic collaboration with students. Social networking with Japanese students is an area where teachers have not customarily entered, involving issues (mostly on the teachers' side) of online technological proficiency, language skills, and the necessity of an invitation from a Mixi member.

Student attitudes were probed as to a possible ambivalence in valuing their free expression versus the integrative motivation of social involvement with a teacher. A sort of Heisenberg Principle was also presupposed whereby to observe a social phenomenon is to change it. One prediction was that results would

differ with regard to whether or not a teacher was welcome in a student SNS community depending on how students were approached for an invitation. The peer group dynamics did turn out to be quite complex, but Mixi evidently reinforces some traditional values in the new media.

Social networking was proposed as a Web 2.0 educational approach that could be authentic, collaborative, and immersive in cutting through power hierarchies and positively blurring the distinction between the classroom and the real life of students and teachers, which nowadays includes a virtual dimension.

Treating students as unique individual subjects, not as objects, provided an alternative to Appadurai's (1990) sweeping anthropology of globalization, taking students' culture into

account while maintaining the recognition of perspective.

Treating students as subjects has methodological support in sociocultural theory (Kramsch, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) and social constructivist theory in the psychology of language teaching (cf. Williams & Burden, 1997). Students' contextual and developmental particulars can be of more value for teaching and research than abstract generalizations about aggregate populations. Possibly more important even than identities, which can be constraining, changing roles can be observed. Japanese people tend to have a repertoire of social gears according to relative status and the occasion. Individual agency, creativity and self-reformation processes (cf. Roebuck, 2000, pp. 79ff) are still presupposed, but in light of East Asian cultures, research on social networking should examine the social dimension more deeply. Thus, at both individual and social levels, interpreting descriptive data on even one student can be of interest for research.

Treating students as subjects is practiced in the Osaka Jogakuin College (OJC) curriculum. For example, a Computer Communication class with one student enrolled was nevertheless offered again the following year. The educational philosophy of OJC, a women's college where all students major in English, treats each student as "a unique individual of immeasurable worth" (Swenson & Cornwell, 2007, p. 109).

Moreover, treating students as subjects could enhance integrative motivation to learn EFL. Given the East Asian sense of reciprocity, student responsiveness and heightened

motivation are to be predicted when a teacher gives extra time to supplementary online communication, models the goals of bilingualism and biculturalism, and practices reflect a self-actualizing target culture.

The presentation employed metaphors of lines and perspectives including "technoscapes" (Appadurai, 1990) in order to interpret social phenomena encountered in interactions with students. Metaphors of lines in social spaces are used in various ways, not only spatially. For instance, should students and teachers just read their lines? Both may have a choice to conform to a given role or to change the story line (cf. Reading behind the lines, below).

This presentation, however, refers more to invisible lines in default human relationships. These include default behavioral roles and constraints, manifesting variously as gender, age, or power inequalities. There are unwritten, unspoken expectations in societies and institutional cultures. There are mutually exclusive affiliations in purportedly monocultural societies, so sides may have to be taken. There are invisible lines of boundaries around socially acceptable, safe paths, from which it is risky to stray or to go out of bounds.

Furthermore, these taken-for-granted assumptions do not map across cultures. A contrasting culture can be like a minefield with invisible tripwires. For example, to implement constructivism in instructivist cultures may require sensitive negotiations.

A well-known metaphor is reading between the lines, which can mean discerning the

meaning of actions or omissions, words or symbolic texts, implications or motives, and noticing transformations. Student reactions in particular should be taken as objective feedback on a task.

Then there is also a sort of reading behind the lines to find out how much autonomy or wiggle room is possible. Language policies and programs are subject to interpretation for flexibility in order to empower local practitioner agency (Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007, pp. 447ff).

This presentation is particularly concerned with going behind the lines, entering default student territory, in this case by online social networking. Success would be defined as authentic collaboration with students that enhances their integrative motivation toward the target language community.

### **GOING BEHIND STUDENT LINES WITH MIXI**

Experiments in crossing the above-mentioned default social lines by social networking seemed to meet with mixed results. Negotiations on teacher-student Mixi involvement in three 2007 OJC courses for two- and four-year college women are briefly reported as follows.

Bilingual Education in spring 2007 was a one-semester course meeting four hours a week, with 13 students in their third or fourth year. Thematically the course was unrelated to social networking (SNS), which may have added to the difficulty of receiving an invitation from an individual, which is necessary to join Mixi. One active student agreed to invite the teacher into Mixi but never followed through.

During that semester the presenter considered asking an administrator for an invitation to Mixi, which would have eased the way with students. Yet the presenter felt a strong inhibition, as if there were a teacher-administrator frontier of lines to cross analogous to student-teacher lines on the other side, so the presenter could empathize with inhibitions students may feel in crossing default lines toward the teacher.

Computer Communication in fall 2007 was a one-semester course meeting two hours a week. One student enrolled, in the final semester of her two-year course. Three times during the 13 weeks other students participated out of personal interest, including when the activity was to make a video introducing Mixi in English for YouTube. An invitation to join Mixi was readily received from the enrolled student after a few weeks of establishing rapport. The class was thematically related to SNS, although Mixi was not a formal part of class work except indirectly as the subject of authentic collaboration in making the YouTube video. The video, partly shown during the presentation, introduces the Mixi Japanese language interface, discussing with students their attitudes and possible ambivalence about inviting a teacher into their SNS peer communities.

Discussion class, also in fall 2007, involved 26 students in the second semester of their first year of two, meeting three hours a week. This class was not particularly related to social networking, but the teacher had become a Mixi member earlier in the semester and brought up the subject in class discussions. The idea of a

class Mixi community to stay in touch after they and their teacher scattered at the end of the school year was appealing, but negotiations were inconclusive as the semester ended. Evidently because not all students were Mixi members yet, what seemed to be negative inaction was actually the virtue of consideration toward friends not in Mixi. Some time after the school year was over, when the issue of excluding some students became moot, most students in the class did form a Mixi community.

Once the teacher was a Mixi member, word spread fast among friends of the Computer Communication class student. Invitations to become a friend in Mixi ensued, and students were so bold as to introduce themselves in person to the presenter, saying they were his friend in Mixi under a certain nickname. The presenter in turn was able to invite former students in hallways or at their graduation party, even welcoming students who had joined the OJC community in Mixi to network before they entered the college. A sort of agglutinative process of relationship formation through friends of friends or commonalities became discernible, a social phenomenon that merits more cross-cultural research for possible universality.

The presentation then included three illustrations of the Japanese interface of Mixi with annotations in English and explanation of Mixi functions that could be useful for educational purposes.

## **DISCUSSION OF HYPOTHESES AND QUESTIONS RAISED**

Finally, the presentation summarized some of the hypotheses of the research in terms of questions and tentative answers.

Why were there varied results in attempting to social network with different classes? Results were found to be actually consistent with Japanese sociocultural values and peer group dynamics. Time-place-occasion sensitivity and individual motivations were also evident.

Did metaphors of lines and social spaces scaffold issues suitably? Invisible lines, social territories, crossing boundaries, hierarchical lines and the like proved useful by forefronting sociocultural norms and expectations that tend to be taken for granted within a culture and wrongly assumed to apply across cultures.

Did social networking with students enhance their L2 motivation? It was not confirmed longitudinally, but enjoyable learning can be transformative. Online technology makes it possible for the first time to systematically follow how students use what they have learned after graduation. Integrative motivation of an intrinsically motivated student was reinforced, as confirmed by an interview for subsequent research. Other students agglutinated to social networking with the presenter of their own free will once the wall was breached.

Did “technoscapes” serve to map individual and group perspectives? “Global flows” and the like lack precision to account for the particular context in Japan. The focus on is rightly placed on students’ perspectives, but this is involved in

treating them as unique subjects rather than as objects en masse.

What needs further research in SNS or Web 2.0 for L2 learning? 'Self'-centered motivation theories are not yet proven applicable to East Asian educational contexts. Alm (2006, pp. 30-34) cites self-determination theory in finding Web 2.0 activities motivating in Australia for German. This presentation agrees but points more strongly to the social in SNS for East Asian students.

## WEBSITES

Mixi: <<http://mixi.jp>>

YouTube: <<http://www.youtube.com>>

Social Networking in Japanese Student Territory with Mixi. This video was made in class for this presentation. Retrieved July 25, 2008, from: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXBwr6gMrrM>>

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