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### Internet as Friend and Foe, Help and Hindrance

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#### *Abstract*

*Teaching our students about social issues has never been easy: Obstacles to overcome include parents and communities, their cultures and mores, their government and laws, and last, but not least, their access to resources.*

*This paper acknowledges the challenges of teaching social issues in the context of cultural differences, where there are parental concerns, government laws, religious taboos, and a lack of resources, but will focus on the use of the Internet to make it a friend and a help. While this focus may seem too "advanced" when access to the Internet originally was limited to the so-called highly developed nations, in recent years the obstacles to access and use of the Internet have slowly been erased. To prepare librarians and their students to live with the Internet even though they lack access now is to assume that they will never have advanced technologies, and this is a false and even dangerous assumption. School librarians need to prepare now.*

#### **I. Introduction**

Throughout the history of the world, we find cultures disrupted through a variety of events from natural disasters, wars, plagues, and exploration among others. When the world had less population, when transportation and communication between countries, and even between villages, was less technical, it was not as difficult for a people to retain

their cultures and their mores in spite of those events that challenged them. What is more difficult is to understand other cultures. McShane suggests that

There are multiple cultures in the world, each separated by its differences. Differences between cultures are, in general, easy to recognize yet hard to comprehend. Comprehension is difficult because it depends upon viewing the culture *from the inside* rather than forming an understanding from the *outside*. Even from within, it is difficult to recognize cultural characteristics and understand them; they can be as elusive to insiders as they are to outsiders. This confusion is just one reason why so many people are fascinated by cultural diversity. It also helps explain why others are threatened by it.<sup>1</sup>

Communication changes also threaten the retention of cultural characteristics. Satellite transmission of televised programs in countries previously able to both monitor and censor what program came into their television sets opens the world in a seemingly uncontrolled way. The advent of the Internet has added additional threats to the stability of any group striving to retain their cultural and their ethnic identity, and this begins early in the life of children in the United States.

True conflict arises if students enter schools where they are taught to read, write and use arithmetic with examples from that country's culture rather than the country where they may have been born. They are given an introduction to the history and geography of their new country with little attention to the homeland of their parents. They learn a curriculum designed for them by another government, and their teachers may often be using the latest advocacy in educational practice that is greatly different from the educational process in the country from which they came.

The United States is often referred to as a melting pot of races, ethnicity, cultures, and religious beliefs. The diversity is equal to almost any other country in the world. In the author's state, California, moved from a Caucasian majority to a diverse majority within the past five years. On the campus of San Jose State University where both authors teach, the largest ethnic group is Asian Pacific. This paper will reflect the ethnic and cultural issues found in the United States because it remains a small picture of the world. It is also a place where conflict exists in teaching social issues such as value systems and ethics because of parental concerns and governing laws. All of this becomes even more intense when technology enters the picture.

Mestre<sup>2</sup> suggests that institutions are assessing their programs to help students from a variety of ethnic groups to use computer applications because this should increase educational achievement. She believes that computer skills as well as study skills are "indispensable for succeeding in school." This paper will not address the digital divide, translated into those who have computer access and those who do not partially because that divide is becoming less an issue. What we are addressing is the use of the Internet and how that reflects on the cultures in other countries.

We are not directly addressing the problem of language differences. Many countries are developing resources in the language of their country so that the Internet, while a large proportion is in English, is becoming more useful by their citizens with electronic connections.

What will be covered are methods that can help school librarians assist teachers in teaching social issues and using electronic information for this. Students in the global community must gain technology skills to succeed. Mestre believes that students need technical skills to prepare for college and beyond. In classrooms, computers become tools to compose, enhance, and submit their work. School librarians help their teachers and their students to use the Internet to build individual course-related Web pages. These may be used by teachers to make assignments as well as to access online library resources.

School librarians and teachers teach students to use the Internet to search for and evaluate information from experts, information sites and even from other students around the world. The ability to access libraries around the world, locate full-text copies of articles, view research reports, and find newspaper articles to build into research assignments. To be able to do this effectively these school librarians and teachers must understand and recognize cultural differences.

Students in the U.S. have many cultural differences and these affect all teacher-student relationships because these differences affect classroom behavior. Mestre describes some of these as non-verbal behavior, kinetic behavior, eye contact, personal space, and small and large group experiences.

### Cultural Differences

Those cultures where students are taught to revere education, where the teacher is almost a god, will sit quietly in the classroom, listening intently. They will be reluctant to ask questions, and they will not obviously disagree with what they hear. Students in some cultures plagiarize because they believe copying is sincere flattery. Students may be reluctant to exercise any independence. Drawing conclusions or using information learned to produce new knowledge is a difficult behavior to learn for many cultures.

Students who begin school in the U.S. are generally very independent. They do not necessarily obey their parents and, subsequently do not obey their teachers. In contrast, other cultures depend upon the family for their loyalty.

When individuals misunderstand another's cultures, anything from hurt feelings to armed conflicts can happen. At the very least, students misinterpret. Agosto<sup>3</sup> states that each time students read, listen to, or view a text of some type, they relate it to their social and cultural experiences. She shares an example of a film where all family members are talking at once and suggests that in a Midwestern, English-speaking home, this would be discord because those students are taught that interrupting is impolite where as a student from a Costa Rican home would merely think it was harmony because vocal frequency and volume suggest social comfort and general happiness. School librarians in the U.S. need to understand these cultural differences so they can view the behavior of teachers and students in the context of their cultures, explaining when these behaviors are different rather than anticipating that everyone will act in a manner consistent with the new country's culture.

### Non-Verbal Communication

While much of our behavior is at the nonverbal level, its influence on the communication process is very powerful and can be easily misinterpreted. When students and parents from other cultures hold different views and have learned different cultural rules of when, how, where, and to what degree to express certain behaviors, they interpret

behaviors they perceive differently.<sup>4</sup> Librarians need to understand the role of nonverbal behavior in communication and its role in library activities in particular.

In body language, for example, some cultures communicate more with the eyes and by touch and nods. To Westerners a nod is a positive signal, but to people from other cultures, a simple nod can be quite complicated. It could mean yes or no, or it can be used to express a lack of comprehension or to assure that the speaker is being listened to or may be considered rude in other cultures.

Nonverbal behaviors can facilitate or hinder the communication process. Thus, how a librarian behaves nonverbally may have more importance than what the librarian says, and one who deliberately displays such nonverbal behavior as touching, leaning forward, and smiling may elicit a favorable or unfavorable response in the student.

### Kinetic Behavior

Kinetic behavior is a difficult cultural aspect to learn and ignorance of the behavior can be catastrophic. A simple example of kinetic behavior response is asking three-year-olds to hold up fingers to show their age. In the U.S. the child would hold up the first, middle, and ring finger. In other countries, the child would hold the thumb and the next two fingers. In fact, pointing fingers can be an insult even when showing someone the direction to walk. In other cultures, one cannot stand taller than the head of someone older and more important. In yet another one cannot expose the bottom of one's feet toward another. It is the highest possible insult. A smile to one culture is approval. In another a child smiling at an adult is an insult and interpreted as making fun of an adult.

When working with teachers and students from other cultures, trying to understand these behaviors is essential. However, it may take some questioning or additional research to find out about these kinetic behaviors and then remembering them at the appropriate moment.

### Eye Contact

We in the United States give great importance to looking someone directly in the eyes. In other cultures, a child should look down rather than meeting the eyes of another and, if that eye contact is continued, it becomes insulting. To say, "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" is asking the student to break a taught behavior to match another's expectation.

### Personal Space

Mestre discusses the "invasion" of one's personal space. The nearness one stands may bring discomfort to one person and even anger from another. Unawareness of cultural differences in personal space can seriously hamper communication between individuals.<sup>5</sup> Mestre suggests that the distance at which an Anglo feels comfortable differs from what is preferred by most Latin Americans.<sup>6</sup> Generally, what is personal space for a Latino is considered intimate space for an Anglo. Most of us, in face-to-face conversation, prefer to be at least an arm's length from the second person. Anglos tend to back up a step if they feel their space is being invaded. Latinos will maintain their space. When someone believes in close proximity gets too close to someone who values personal space, they may view the other person as too close, too pushy, or too sexy while the other is considered cold and aloof.

Unfortunately, in the U.S., touching students has, in recent years, become an action that may result in legal action. Keeping an arm's length is required, and if a student is used to being given a physical pat on the arm to signify success, stepping back will seem hurtful.

### Group vs. Individual

According to Mestre, some cultures are better able to manage one thing, one situation, and one person at a time (monochronic behavior) where other cultures are able to handle many things (multi-tasking), many situations, and many people at a time (polychromic behavior). She describes Anglos as falling into the monochronic group while Latinos show polychromic behaviors. This leads to the apparent ability of Latinos to talk at the same time and to expect people to be able to do many things at the same time. It is then difficult for the Latino to understand why the Anglo wants one-on-one contact and will be angry at the Latino for not waiting in line.

## II. Social Issues

Teaching about social issues becomes even more difficult when we are faced with parental concerns as well as previous parental teaching. Acceptance of all types of differences becomes more problematic. The ability to change perceptions increases in difficulty when students' learned behaviors are taught from an early age within cultural environments. This includes race, attitudes towards persons in a less socio-economic group and religion. Within religions, students may gain an understanding of how others worship, but overcoming biases because of religions or races is very difficult. Race will be discussed first. The issue of race is well addressed in an article in *School Library Journal*:

Race is an issue that few people are comfortable discussing. Teachers want to avoid the controversies that inevitably arise. It's one of those topics, like politics and religion, that my mother always told me are impolite to discuss in public. But if we do not discuss race, how will we ever get past it? Until we are willing to have open and honest dialogue, the ignorance and misunderstanding that is at the root of racial prejudice will continue to divide us.<sup>7</sup>

McShane adds, "In today's cultures, many people are under the damaging illusion that the *homo sapiens* is inherently divided into races. There is a further misconception that particular races are inherently 'pure' while others are not."<sup>8</sup>

Students in schools in the U.S. come from very different socio-economic backgrounds. This presents a challenge to teachers to teach tolerance for students who do not have the same opportunities and to make sure that students, regardless of their economic beginnings have an equal opportunity to get further education. This is not an easy task in the U.S., and it may be virtually impossible in other cultures or countries where testing divides students for continuing their education.

Differences in worship are visible in looking at buildings (or lack thereof) in which worship is conducted. Who conducts the worship service and what is said during that service further define a religion. Then, there are the written documents in existence

to help people worship and, within those written documents are found the laws that govern the behavior of those who believe and follow the doctrines. This affects the coverings people have for their heads, for their entire bodies, and for the foods that people will and will not eat.

History has shown us that these differences cannot be overcome in centuries, and they, perhaps more than all of the above, dictate the social issues to be addressed in our classroom and libraries. Differences provide great difficulty in presenting social issues to a group where beliefs vary, where abortion is a sin, when evolution is not a science, and justification to conquer a nation is based upon the geography of where two different peoples wish to live and find sharing that geography beyond difficult to become impossible.

Within the United States, we have a legal reason for giving students information presenting all sides of an issue, our First Amendment to the Constitution. This provides for Children's Rights: First Amendment Rights. Here, the First Amendment serves as the basis of intellectual rights. A child's intellectual rights can be viewed as legal rights as well as ethical rights. The application of the First Amendment to children generally arises in matters dealing with public education, particularly in court cases concerning censorship. Many parents feel that schools and public libraries should limit certain materials because they are harmful to children. This is sometimes decided in court cases.

### **III. Solutions:**

Obviously, we are not going to solve the problems of the world today, but, if we do not attempt to help children in our highly technical global environment with boundaries of geography disappearing in a wireless world, they truly will not be able to be successful. The ability to get information to our children with these new technologies has become transparent, but we may want to move them carefully onto what was once called the information highway: the wonder world of the Internet and the World Wide Web. A good beginning is found within books.

#### **Books:**

All cultures today use books to teach. Stewig says that "one of the most effective ways of using children's books in the classroom is as a basis for learning more about other cultures."<sup>9</sup> This includes using books to help children understand other cultures, contrasting two cultures, travel to other places including historic locations and cultures, to bring unfamiliar cultures alive. MacPhee believes

Most ethnically-encapsulated white students experiences of other sociocultural groups are through television or marginal and superficial interaction that does not present a whole or true picture of other groups. Multicultural literature can provide such students with vicarious experiences of others' sociocultural attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. The vicarious experience goes beyond mere discussions of issues like racism, discrimination, and prejudice—which discussed in the classroom are still framed within the context of the students' culture—by bringing the perspectives and experiences of others into the classroom and allowing students to see the context or situation in which these issues exist. Because of its

narrative and descriptive nature, literature invites students into sociocultural contexts as sympathetic listeners or sharers and not as observers of unexplained or unexamined actions of others. The issues of racism, discrimination, and inequality are made concrete when multicultural literature is used as more than a window to look at others, becoming, instead, a vehicle for cross-cultural dialogue.

Ed Sullivan<sup>10</sup> suggests the use of books to help young people identify with and ultimately define racial identity and these are available in U.S. libraries. These books include non-fiction books that give historical overviews of mixed-race issues. One of our authors interviewed racially mixed young people and the result of her research is available on teen shelves.

Many of our novels include racially mixed young people in contemporary settings. Some of these have sports themes and these appeal to boys. Historical fiction may also appeal to the reader and can help them understand the issues facing the protagonists in the story. Stories about war experiences often have interracial themes

Sullivan concludes that “books share the message that conflict, whether the inner struggle of a racially mixed individual wrestling with his or her identity or a violent act of prejudice, will always be there as long as we allow race to divide us. The subject may make us uncomfortable but ignoring the issue will not make it go away. Race does matter; it matters very much for many people and for many different reasons. Books can open up opportunities for librarians and teachers to engage readers in discussions about our nation’s past and about our contemporary realities.”

Religion is less often a subject for novels for children although it is available in those non-fiction offerings that help students learn about the great religions of the world. These do not cover small denominations, and care must be taken to make sure they provide accurate, unbiased information. This is definitely a subject that has much misinformation available on the Internet and it is one reason why, while using the Internet for information, care must be taken to teach children how to discern misinformation when it is located.

### Why the Internet

The Internet is useful to introduce students to other cultures and mores. The Internet can help them understand differences and similarities between and among social issues. Further, according to Mestre, finding information on the Internet creates an enthusiasm for learning and helps school librarians and teachers motivate. When carefully taught how to recognize relevant information, it allows students to find information that is useful to them. Using culturally relevant material has been noted as a major motivational force for Latino students.<sup>11</sup> In using this information to write a research paper or create a project using the information found on the Internet gives them both a positive outlook and the lifelong learning ability to collect, organize, analyze, evaluate, construct, and both build and publish new knowledge.

All students today will need computer literacy skills if they are to compete in a global economy. Computer skills allow them to improve their writing skills and their ability to search databases is essential even if it may bring a different picture to the teachings of parents concerning ethical and moral behavior.

### The Internet: Tool: Expanding Ethnic and Cultural Communication among Students

School librarians can help teachers link their classrooms to students in other countries where they can exchange cultural information and discuss their common problems. The Internet by its very nature is updated constantly, helping teachers develop a curriculum that is both up-to-date and exciting. The Internet can be used to communicate across countries increasing social interaction and collaboration. Students will not necessarily recognize that they are communicating with others who are outside their racial, ethnic, or cultural group because they won't know of age, ethnic, gender, or race differences, and they will gain a perspective of life in another country.

Using the Internet not only helps develop literacy skills, it can develop critical thinking skills as students problem solve with others around the world. Learning similarities and differences with social issues will increase collaboration and understanding. Mestre makes the following suggestions for teaching with the Internet:

- Each student can take on all kinds of roles: world traveler, foreign correspondent, explorer, intelligence analyst, scientist, artist, musician, published author, and respected commentator.
- Teachers can include or ask students to find sites that incorporate aspects of different cultures.
- Students can explore aspects of culture, politics, history, and geography, including daily newspapers. Through e-mail with other schools in different countries, students can learn what is happening, sometimes even as it happens, and they may undertake action as a result.
- While broadening their world view, students should be encouraged to find primary and secondary sources related to their own ethnicity. It is common for minority students to go through school rarely seeing their ethnic group portrayed as achievers.<sup>12</sup>

While these might seem to be simple, uncomplicated suggestions to many school librarians, they are not so applicable in every location. School librarians may offer access to information at three levels from the very basic to open access to the world with the first not including access to the Internet. It depends upon the environment.

When governments are concerned with the availability of information and limit its access, discussions of politics may not be possible. In a restrictive environment, school librarians use their standard selection principles and provide library services as they have been allowed. In this case, school librarians strive to provide the best possible resources to meet the needs of their teachers and students. Their access to information may not include access to the Internet. In this environment, teachers more likely teach using the textbook rather than making research assignments that include extensive use of the holdings of the library. However, when television draws the picture of other countries for students in these schools, efforts should be made to get a more realistic picture.

At the next level, school librarians open access to resources on the Internet, but considering parental concerns, they choose what are considered appropriate web sites. These are then linked to the school library web page so that students have direct access to the information on the Internet, but it is limited to specific sites. School librarians will

work with teachers to develop assignments that require research into library resources and these web sites will be chosen to allow as wide a search as possible.

At the highest level, school librarians introduce students to information available to them on the Internet. This means they must teach students not only how to search for information, but they must teach them how to limit the number of “hits” to resources and then to evaluate what they find so that information is accurate, relevant, and useful. Finally, they must teach them to how to use that information to create new knowledge. School librarians must collaborate with teachers so that assignments reflect good teaching practice that will encourage students to exercise critical thinking skills.

It is vital that librarians/teachers have a strong commitment to helping students achieve. They need to provide both a nurturing environment and have high academic expectations of their students. They also strive to provide the technical experiences that are necessary to help students survive in a global economy.

Librarians and media specialists have key roles when it comes to assisting students and teachers in learning computer applications and educational technology in a multicultural society. School librarians need to be innovative and demonstrate to teachers, parents and others in the community the value of the Internet and its resources to students as alternate ways to assess information. However, in doing so, they must keep in mind that not students learn in the same way, and they will have to vary the way they assist students from diverse cultural backgrounds in acquiring information through technology. They must remember that not all parents agree with all that may be taught in any curriculum. They must remember that not all governments are open to open access to information. School librarians are the portals to the wider world of information for their students using the Internet and should work diligently to see that students have access.

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<sup>1</sup> McShane, James. “Confronting Diversity in a Homogeneous Environment.” p. viii in Kuharets, Olga R., ed. *Ventures into Cultures*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Mestre, Lori S. “Improving Computer-Use Success for Students of Diverse Backgrounds.” *Knowledge Quest* 28:5 (May/June 2000): 20-28.

<sup>3</sup> Agosto, Denise E. “The Cultured Word: Cultural Background, Bilingualism, and the School Library.” *School Libraries Worldwide* 7:1 (January 2001): 46-57.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang, A. *Nonverbal Behavior: Perspectives Applications, Intercultural Insight* Lewiston, N.Y.: C. J. Hogrefe, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Larason, L. and Robinson, J. S. “The Reference Desk: Service Point or Barrier?” *RQ* 23:3 (Spring 1984): 332-49.

<sup>6</sup> Nine-Curt. *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Sullivan, Ed. “Race Matters: A Librarian Looks at Books about Racial Identity and Relationships.” *School Library Journal* (June 2002): 40-41.

<sup>8</sup> McShane, James. “Confronting Diversity in a Homogeneous Environment.” p. vii in Kuharets, Olga R., ed. *Ventures into Cultures*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Stewig, John Warren. “Using Children’s Books as a Bridge to Other Cultures.” *The Social Studies* (January/February 1992): 36.

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<sup>10</sup> Sullivan, Ed. "Race Matters: A Librarian Looks at Books about Racial Identity and Relationships." *School Library Journal* (June 2002): 40-41.

<sup>11</sup> Mestre, L.S. *Latinos, Technology and Libraries* (Ed.D. diss. University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2000).

<sup>12</sup>Fiske, E. "The Undergraduate Hispanic Experience." *Change* 210:3 (May/June 1988): 29-33.