



Building cross-border communities to energize learning, teaching and innovation in higher education

As universities worldwide take an increasingly interdisciplinary approach to higher education, effective communication must bridge the gap across fields of study as well as across linguistic, cultural and professional boundaries. To build cross-border communities, scholars – and the publishers and librarians who serve faculty and students – need a sophisticated ‘communications technology’ toolkit. When an international publisher sent an e-mail survey to a global network of more than 1,000 scholars, with questions about the methods, systems and platforms that work best in their collaborations with colleagues, the results showed their technology preferences to be simple and straightforward, not much different from old-fashioned letters and phone calls. The real challenge, these scholars said, is to develop a methodology for cross-cultural collaboration and enhance training and support systems at different levels – to look beyond the technical aspects of connecting and focus on the human challenge of communication and understanding.

Introduction

An English-professor friend from South Africa first told me about e-mail: “electronic mail”, he explained. He had heard about it at a conference in America, where people had asked him for his e-mail address. “I have one now at Rutgers”, he told me. “You should get one, too”.

Soon afterwards, in the summer of 1990, I moved from England to America, where I immediately bought a modem to attach to my portable PC that must have weighed 20 pounds. I got an e-mail address from the Institute for Global Communications in California. Every day I would dial up to see if the two friends who also had e-mail, one in New Jersey and the other in London, had sent me a message.

Businesses did not take advantage of e-mail until the World Wide Web came into being, some four to five years later. Universities, however, were far ahead. This made me curious about whether, in 2012, the scholars I work with as an academic publisher and sometime author, are similarly advanced in their use of communications technology.

Today, with universities everywhere taking an interdisciplinary approach to education, and many also trying to bridge the academic/practitioner divide, effective communication demands collaboration not only across fields of study but across linguistic, cultural and professional boundaries. It seemed obvious to me that scholars – and the publishers and librarians who serve them and their students – would have a ‘communications technology’ toolkit to build cross-border communities that will energize learning, teaching and innovation in institutions of higher education. But I wondered how much international collaboration is really taking place and what could be done to make it more pervasive and productive.

My personal experience with cross-cultural collaboration began in 1989 while I was writing a general-audience book about home ecology. I was an American with a potential British audience, and I was drawing on research from Germany and ideas about sustainable living from Australia and India.



KAREN CHRISTENSEN
CEO
Berkshire Publishing
Group LLC

“... effective communication demands collaboration not only across fields of study but across linguistic, cultural and professional boundaries.”

67 I soon moved from home ecology to community studies with a focus on sustainability. Then, in 2004, as senior editor of SAGE's *Encyclopedia of Community*, I faced a surprising challenge when I asked the hundreds of renowned authors to ensure that their work would reflect international traditions and trends. The Americans proved to be particularly insular, often knowing nothing at all about trends in the rest of the world. I found this strange because community is a fundamental human experience, and we all have much to learn from other peoples and cultures. I observed that non-US scholars bristled when they thought that Americans were being US-centric. In November 2004, when Berkshire Publishing Group organized a panel on interdisciplinary scholarship and librarianship for the Charleston Conference in South Carolina, I carried that experience and the four-volume encyclopedia with me, knowing that the innovations the panel participants were discussing – such as cross-disciplinary tagging in databases – were tools we need to improve cross-cultural communication.¹

“...community is a fundamental human experience, and we all have much to learn from other peoples and cultures.”

When this article began to take shape in my mind, I intended to focus on communication tools and the companies that promise to make global scholarly collaboration a reality; I planned to look at listservs, Wikipedia and the special interest groups formed by scholarly associations. Instead, I sent an e-mail to a network of over 1,000 of Berkshire Publishing Group's authors at universities around the world. These people, in dozens of countries, had contributed to five interdisciplinary reference publications. I posed a series of basic questions to this group:

Do you collaborate with colleagues in other countries?

Would you like to collaborate with colleagues abroad?

With whom would you like to have more interaction?

Does the digital divide thwart your cross-cultural communication with colleagues?

What [communication] tools do you use, and how well (or badly) do they work?

What capabilities do you wish existed in communication systems or tools, and how might these energize teaching and learning in higher education?

I discovered that many of these scholars felt passionate about the importance of working internationally and were doing so, for the most part, with nothing more than e-mail and Skype.

The response I received from the authors was so voluminous that it derailed me from contacting current and forthcoming authors, even though this might have been a better group to poll because some of their research is cutting-edge and global.

I had believed that major issues would include the digital divide, poor English skills on the part of non-native-English scholars, and poor global language skills on the part of those for whom English is our primary language. (US authors, I learned, do less work with foreign scholars than authors from other countries.) I had anticipated more use of technology such as the web platforms Academia.edu and Mendeley.com, as well as Facebook, LinkedIn and even Twitter. Instead, three basic themes emerged from this initial sampling:

- tools aren't really the issue; most academics want to keep things simple
- institutions of higher education need to develop a methodology for cross-cultural collaboration
- the real challenge is looking beyond technology to focus on cross-border communities based on human understanding and interconnection.

68 The scholars who responded to my inquiry wrote openly and in detail about their academic situations, bringing into focus the things that institutions and information specialists can do to increase the range and quality of cross-cultural collaboration.

The internationalization of higher education

Global problems require global solutions, and global classrooms require global teaching. One of the authors, Werner Menski, a professor of law at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, explained, "I work, as you know, in the Law School at SOAS . . . My first year class of 125 students has people from more than 50 countries . . . The combinations are just mindboggling, the challenges of intercultural communication are gigantic".² Professors across the globe echoed this experience, and librarians serve a similar variety of students and faculty.

Many universities have not only attempted to attract more students from China and other countries, they have also set up offices and even campuses in China as well as the Middle East and Southeast Asia. For example, Duke University is opening a campus near Shanghai that will serve Chinese students, and Notre Dame has opened a Beijing office and is expanding Asian focus across the university.

Innovative programs often result from collaborations among international universities. Carrie Menkel-Meadow, a professor of law at Georgetown Law Center who specializes in dispute resolution and civil procedure, directed a transnational law program founded by Georgetown and 13 other universities in 2008.³ She reported the development of an 'experiential exercise' to introduce students to each other and to the international perspectives they brought to the program; the courses were likewise transnational, with different legal systems represented by faculty and students in each course.⁴

Some scholars wrote about fruitful collaborations with others who seemed unlikely 'matches'. Four Arrows (aka Don Jacobs) at Fielding University, who co-authored *Differing Worldviews in Higher Education* (Sense 2011) with Walter Block, explained: "I got the idea for the book because I was tiring of the polarity in debating the ideas surrounding social justice and ecological justice education".⁵ Having read and disagreed with Block's positions, he took a step back, asking himself what he could do to better understand where Block was coming from so that he did not feel "so polarized. This is not at all common in social justice or any other academic field or political field in fact. Debate is common and debate is about winning and losing. What we do is 'cooperative argumentation'. We still can passionately disagree but . . . hammer out our differences with the goal of understanding how they came to be. An important moment for me in the collaboration was when I realized that much of [Block's] position stemmed from the same frustrations I had with the system as it [exists]".⁶

Joanne B Ciulla, at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond, wrote about the frustration of working with international colleagues who had limited access to technology. "From my experiences working in the developing world, the issue is not so much that people do not have Internet, but that it is either slow, unreliable, or subject to frequent power outages. Scholars often do not get long chunks of time to use it".⁷ She went on to say that "the biggest challenges of working cross-culturally have to do with individual personalities and cultural work ethics – deadlines, etc. The language problem is difficult, but once I understand what someone is trying to write, I [can] usually help . . . reword it".⁸

Gertrud Pfister, a German native teaching in Denmark, had a problem with my e-mail query because she was not sure what I meant by 'higher education'. She reminded me that 'Highers' are the main Scottish university entrance qualification. By higher education, I had meant the American concept of teaching in universities. This confusion was evidence of the point she wanted to make, namely that understanding a language "does not guarantee that you also know the cultural background".⁹

"Debate is common and debate is about winning and losing. What we do is 'cooperative argumentation'."

"... the biggest challenges of working cross-culturally have to do with individual personalities and cultural work ethics ..."

Chris Husbands, Emeritus Reader in Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, was one of the few respondents who said that he worked in a language other than English: “In the past I have written (myself) academic articles in several European languages besides English (French, German, Dutch), but rather doubt whether too many other British academics have”.¹⁰

Philip L Reichel, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Northern Colorado, mentioned that cross-national collaboration often involves translation, which the respective authors have to pay for.¹¹ He got help on a project from the wife of a colleague for a minimum fee, but one has to wonder whether the use of non-professional translators is a problem. I have heard many complaints about the quality of translation into Chinese, not due to censorship, but because the translating was done by untrained graduate students. Chinese publishers often produce books in English, but these are rarely translated or edited by a native English speaker. To prepare an edition for readers outside China, it would be advisable to start from scratch. But this is not the practice of Chinese companies, and librarians need to be aware of possible translation problems when they review English-language materials from Chinese publishers.

Sometimes writing styles do not translate across borders. Professor Reichel discussed inconsistencies in style and citation formatting that stem as much from interdisciplinary as cross-cultural preferences. “When working on some edited volumes I tried to find native English speakers to collaborate with the foreign scholar and that worked out rather well. Regarding citation style, I prefer to work with APA but have found that this style is not as popular in other countries. We have made do, but the problem is especially serious when the author is a lawyer (something, by the way, that is probably true when working with American lawyers—I just don’t have much experience with that). I find that Austrian and German colleagues who are lawyers tend to write with considerable reliance on footnotes. This simply doesn’t work well for much of the criminal justice/criminology manuscript style so we have had problems encouraging them to either leave the footnotes out or to incorporate the needed information into the text stream”.¹²

In regard to plagiarism, something international publishers deal with often, Ciulla wrote: “Sometimes [authors] do not seem original because they either do not know the literature or they have limited exposure to it”.¹³ Knowing the international literature of one’s field, rather than depending on a limited, familiar body of work in one’s native language, is becoming a standard requirement for cross-cultural publication.¹⁴

“Knowing the international literature of one’s field, rather than depending on a ... body of work in one’s native language, is becoming a standard requirement for cross-cultural publication.”

Keiko Ikeda, a professor of education at Yamaguchi University, Japan, mentioned that language barriers present considerable problems in collaborating with foreign scholars, but said that a more complex issue arises when “researchers are inclined to be influenced only by the country in which he or she got their PhD, whether the USA or UK or Australia”.¹⁵ Ikeda mentioned something I have heard from other people: that foreign-educated academics (especially in the humanities and social sciences) often find it difficult to get a job in their home country. Similarly, Clementine Fujimura, a professor in the Languages and Cultures Department at the United States Naval Academy, pointed out that “what we call anthropology in the US is very different from anthropology in other parts of the world”.¹⁶

Edgar Schein, from the Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, extended his concerns about multicultural collaboration to organizations and occupations, but his comments resonate across the academic/practitioner divide. “I have certainly worried about the cross-border issue in the context of organizational cultures and especially occupational cultures such as doctors and nurses”.¹⁷ In *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (2010), Schein proposed some solutions: “For multicultural collaborations to work, the members must first learn about each other in a temporary cultural island . . . Cultural islands that attempt to facilitate this level of mutual understanding are created

70 when we send teams to Outward Bound kinds of training, when we put teams in simulations, in role playing situations, in post-mortems or After Action Reviews".¹⁸

Schein's comments reflect the need seen by Menkel-Meadow for more innovative programs, such as the one that she developed at the Center for Transnational Legal Studies at Georgetown: more curriculum change and cross-cultural exchange.

Gayle Baugh, at the Department of Management & MIS (Management Information Systems), University of West Florida, admitted she was eager to find new approaches. "I've been worrying about why I am less successful with international collaborations than I would like to be. You mentioned the 'digital divide,' but I don't think that access to electronics is really the problem in many parts of the world . . . [it's] how we think about research and how we develop publications. There are major differences, for example, between the US and Britain in the way that we develop research ideas and express those ideas—and we speak 'the same' language".¹⁹ Professor Baugh also raised an issue that numerous US editors face daily: "In many areas of the world, education is based on the British system, not that of the US. So the educational process prepares individuals for writing styles that are more like British or European, not the more direct style that is common in North America. Yet academic publishing occurs predominantly in the US".²⁰

"Collaborators work better together ... if they actually are able to meet face-to-face on at least a few occasions."

"Collaborators work better together", Baugh believes, "if they actually are able to meet face-to-face on at least a few occasions. But for those of us that are employed at smaller, more teaching-focused institutions, that sort of travel is difficult. I can't ever just take a week and work with a co-author in another country".²¹ Baugh's e-mail related to my original question about the tools and technology available for cross-border communication. Who in the academic world is using them, and how well do they work?

Tools for international collaboration

The authors I approached had a great deal to say about how, where and when they use communication technology. Surinder Kahai at the State University of New York at Binghamton wrote about keeping in touch with colleagues while they are traveling: "We have been able to collaborate seamlessly because of our prior relationships. We typically end up using Skype, Google Docs, e-mail, and Join.me (screen sharing site) for our collaboration. They are so beneficial that even when my colleagues are here (and in fact may be a few offices away), we use these tools to collaborate".²²

Albert Bates, President of the Global Village Institute for Appropriate Technology, is a non-academic who works with intentional communities. He wrote from Ecoaldea Gratitude ("deep in the Yucatan peninsula") during a storm, using Dragon Dictate on his iPad.²³ "It is raining here in the jungle", he said, "the kind [of rain] you get only in the tropics this time of year. My thatch roof shows no sign of leaks, so I get to enjoy the roar".²⁴ He explained how he manages to keep in touch with colleagues in remote locations:

"[We have] on-going collaborations between our home ecovillage and groups in Palestine, Estonia, Mallorca, Ireland, Belize and Mexico. We swap personnel, publications, DVDs, coursewares, and tools. We use Skype, e-mail, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other new media to stay in communication . . . Here in about one of the rural-est, most boonie parts in the world, a part of Mexico two hours by bus from the nearest city, where the first language is Mayan, the houses have palm roofs, the streets are dirt and electricity goes off at least part of every day (where it even exists)—to have 3–4 mps internet with unlimited throughput 24/7 is something that takes some getting used to. We pay \$200 per month in Tennessee for HughesNet service that is 1/3 as fast, half as reliable, and limited to 500 MB per day. Here they pay \$18 for the telephone and the DSL is free and unlimited. Ojala!"²⁵

David R Caruso, the special assistant to the dean at Yale College (the undergraduate program at Yale University), assessed a number of communication technologies he uses based on day-to-day practicalities that most collaborators, international or not, are likely

to consider. As almost all other respondents indicated, Caruso prefers e-mail and Skype for data analysis and working on co-authored articles. He wrote:

"E-mail: Works well. Only problem is the time difference with these colleagues.

Skype: Generally works, sometimes have problems with the connection.

Dropbox: Cloud service I use with other collaborators.

Listservs: I was on two or three of them but stopped because lots of posts were irrelevant. Many people were practitioners rather than researchers with naïve and very basic questions or views. One site was dominated by a frequent poster whose views were a bit extreme".²⁶

Caruso described a 'wish list' of technological tools he believed would be useful for international collaboration: an integrated system for communicating via video or audio, one to be integrated with a shared file, and a better platform or site that screens out certain people, for example, those who have commercial interests. As far as personal/professional interaction, Caruso thought it "would be helpful to have a science-based LinkedIn or Facebook-type site where we could search for common interests, skills and projects. But I'd want people to be vetted somehow, either by nomination, affiliation, or listing of skills or publications".²⁷

A number of for-profit enterprises offer the opportunity to network with colleagues, but their primary service is the hosting of people's papers, that is, they serve as a kind of publisher for individual scholars who are eager to make their work, whether conventionally published or not, available to the world. This service seems to be popular in certain fields and with younger, more technologically inclined academics and graduate students. The potential of such platforms is considerable, as David Caruso acknowledged above. I have found that many law scholars like to use the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) platform, in part because they think it is non-commercial. More sophisticated commercial platforms include Mendeley.com and Academic.edu, and Aninet.com, which is aimed specifically at Chinese scholars. Universities host sites as well, but they are usually geared to a specific discipline or field.

"Although e-mail and Skype are far cheaper ... both tend to take up far more time because of their incessant and ubiquitous nature."

Although e-mail and Skype are far cheaper than the methods listed above, both tend to take up far more time because of their incessant and ubiquitous nature. This may be one reason that busy professors tend to avoid new online platforms. While there are many ways to connect with international colleagues today, some methods are specifically geared to the needs of academics. Most scholars appear to be clinging to methods that are not all that different from old-fashioned letters and telephone calls.

The road ahead

Blogging from Dubai airport en route to the 2012 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, David Christian, a historian at Sydney's Macquarie University, wrote about the need for universities to engage in "the systematic building of new and more global loyalties and identities" that his teaching of 'Big History' encourages.²⁸ (Christian's renowned courses cover the story of the universe from the Big Bang to the present day.) "Of course, a sense of global citizenship won't replace existing loyalties to family, culture or nation (and how often today are these loyalties different!). Nor should it replace the traditional tribal loyalties. But if it really does emerge, it will be a powerful new loyalty laid over these older identities, and it may help steer behaviour and politics and science in fruitful directions as we take seriously the global challenge of building sustainable societies. That challenge cannot be met nation by nation. I think that the global community I imagine I'm seeing sitting here at Costas, having a coffee as I type on an American computer built in China, before heading off for a conference in Switzerland is a very positive sign that the national loyalties that have been so powerful and often so destructive for several centuries may slowly be giving way to a larger sense of global community. How naïve is that! But is this perhaps a naïveté that universities need to engage with more seriously?"²⁹

Building cross-border communities to energize learning, teaching and innovation in higher education is still in its early days. The creation of methods, systems and tools that will work well for the global scholarly community will require extensive collaboration by educators, publishers, technology companies and information specialists. Such methods of collaboration need to include:

- curriculum change and new programs
- conferences and other forms of exchange
- more online engagement.

Ed Schein's comments about our human connection resonate here: "As organizations become more decentralized and electronically connected, some version of cultural islands will have to be invented to enable people who have not and may not ever meet each other to develop understanding and empathy".³⁰ This takes us beyond the technical challenges of connecting to the human challenge of true communication and understanding.

"... some version of cultural islands will have to be invented to enable people who have not and may not ever meet each other to develop understanding and empathy."

References and notes

1. Christensen, K, *Interdisciplinary Scholarship and Reference Publishing*. In: *Charleston Conference proceedings 2004*, Eds. Bazirjian, R, Speck, V H and Bernhardt, B R, 2006, Westport, CT, Libraries Unlimited.
2. Menski, W (Professor of Law, School of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of London), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
3. Menkel-Meadow, C, *Why and How to Study "Transnational" Law*, *Assembled*, 2011, 1(7), 97–129.
4. Menkel-Meadow, C (A.B. Chettle, Jr. Professor of Law, Dispute Resolution and Civil Procedure at Georgetown Law Center), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
5. Four Arrows (aka Don Jacobs) (Professor, Fielding Graduate University), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
6. Four Arrows, ref. 5.
7. Ciulla, J B (Coston Family Chair in Leadership and Ethics, Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
8. Ciulla, J B, ref. 7.
9. Pfister, G (Professor, Department of Exercise and Sports Science, University of Copenhagen), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
10. Husbands, C (Emeritus Reader in Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
11. Reichel, P L (Professor of Criminal Justice, Department of Sociology, University of Northern Colorado), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
12. Reichel, P L, ref. 11.
13. Ciulla, J B, ref. 7.
14. This qualification is included in Berkshire Publishing's author guidelines and in the *Berkshire Manual of Style for International Publishing*.
15. Ikeda, K (Professor, Department of Education, Yamaguchi University), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
16. Fujimura, C (Professor, Languages and Cultures Department, United States Naval Academy), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
17. Schein, E H (Professor Emeritus, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Sloan School of Management), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
18. Schein, E H, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (4th ed.), 2010, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
19. Baugh, G (Professor, Department of Management & MIS, University of West Florida) in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
20. Baugh, G, ref. 19.
21. Baugh, G, ref. 19.
22. Kahai, S (Professor, School of Management, Center for Leadership Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
23. Bates, A (President, Global Village Institute for Appropriate Technology), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
24. Bates, A, ref. 23.
25. Bates, A, ref. 23.
26. Caruso, D R (Special Assistant to the Dean at Yale College), in personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
27. Caruso, D R, ref. 26.
28. Christian, D, blog post: <http://vc.mq.edu.au/2012/01/24/how-international-is-davos-and-how-international-are-universities-today/> (accessed 30 January 2012).
29. Christian, D, ref. 28.
30. Schein, E, ref. 17.

Article © Karen Christensen

Karen Christensen, CEO

Berkshire Publishing Group LLC

Tel: +1 413 528 0206 | E-mail: karen@berkshirepublishing.com | Skype: karen_christensen

To cite this article:

Christensen, K, Building cross-border communities to energize learning, teaching and innovation in higher education, *Insights*, 2012, 25(1), 66–73, doi: 10.1629/2048-7754.25.1.66

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/2048-7754.25.1.66>