

# Promoting Effective Chinese-American Cross-cultural Communication

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# Background

- Typically, U.S. college-level students learn Chinese as a foreign language through classroom instruction. Thus, most of them do not have extensive direct contact with native speakers.
- Many scholars advocate online, distance exchange as an ideal environment for enhancing foreign language learning, especially intercultural understanding because it provides “convenient, authentic, direct, and speedy access to native speakers and their cultures” (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002, p. 100).

# Goal

- This program aims to connect American learners of Chinese in the U.S. and Chinese learners of English in China through Internet and Technology.
- Classroom instruction typically focuses on linguistic skills; this program complements classroom instruction by incorporating the cultural component of language learning.
- The ultimate goal is to develop students' intercultural competence.

- Stage 1

# Project Design (1)

- This online cross-cultural exchange program is modeled on *Cultura*, an online cultural exchange project initiated by MIT.
- A Chinese-American Website was created to serve as the online discussion forum: <https://lafchn.wordpress.com/>
- Each week, students are invited to focus on one theme that is of cultural depth such as college life, family, marriage and love, and so on.
- The question is: How should we guide students to engage in in-depth discussions of cultural differences for each theme?

# Project Design (2)

- For each topic, the instructors design a list of cultural questions for the students from both sides to answer in their native languages.
- The instructors then compile answers from both sides and post them on the Chinese-American website.
- Students are invited to analyze the answers and discuss the reasons behind the differences/similarities. When the answers from the two sides are different, it can stimulate in-depth and interesting discussions.

# Project Design (3)

## **Sample Cultural Questions for College Life**

- **Word association**

Please write down three or four words you associated with the following. They can be nouns, adjectives or verbs.

1. College life

- **Sentence completion**

Please finish the following sentences with the first three or four things that come to your mind.

1. A good college student is someone who...

- **Reaction to situations**

Please state the first thing that you would think, say or do in the following (hypothetical) situations.

1. You are at a party and you see one of your friends getting very drunk.

- **Short answer**

Please write down the short answer to the questions

1. What do you remember most about your college life (or activities)? List 3

# • A Brief view of the Wordpress Website:

<https://lafchn.wordpress.com/>

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a WordPress site. The browser's address bar shows the URL <https://lafchn.wordpress.com>. The browser's toolbar includes navigation icons, a search bar, and several open tabs. The website's header is a dark blue bar with the title "Chinese-American Cultural Discussion" on the left, and navigation links for "HOME" and "WEEKLY DISCUSSION THEMES" on the right. A search icon is also present. Below the header is a left sidebar with a blue background, listing several user profiles with their avatars and names: bekywai, My Bui (with the subtitle "Cooking in College"), ellenqg (with the subtitle "About Politics"), and jjandracchi (with the subtitle "My Views on American Government"). The main content area has a white background and features a large heading "WELCOME TO THE CHINESE-AMERICAN CULTURAL DISCUSSION". Below this heading is a paragraph of text: "This site has been designed to foster cultural discussion between students at Lafayette College and students in China." Underneath the text is an "EDIT" button with a pencil icon. At the bottom of the main content area, there is a bolded section header: "ONE THOUGHT ON 'WELCOME TO THE CHINESE-AMERICAN CULTURAL DISCUSSION'".



# Limitations of Stage 1

- The wordpress.com website loaded very slowly in China
- Reduced participation from the China side
- No thread for each topic (earlier postings buried at the bottom)
- No up-to-date topics?
- Just discussion, no final collaborative tasks

- Stage 2

# Improved Design in Stage 2

- The Canvas Website created by Farah Vallera  
<https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/1144070>
- Three-stage design
  - Information exchange tasks
  - Comparison and analysis tasks
  - Collaborative tasks
- More interesting, up-to-date topics
  - Associate three to five words with Trump
  - Trump is...
  - How would you react if Trump were coming to your school to give a talk?

# • A Brief View of the Canvas Website :

<https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/1144070>

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Canvas LMS interface. The address bar shows the URL <https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/1144070/modules>. The page title is "Interculture > Modules".

On the left side, there is a navigation sidebar with the following items: Home, Account, Dashboard, Courses (highlighted), People, Pages, and Outcomes. The "Modules" section is highlighted in blue.

On the right side, there are two buttons: "View Progress" and "+ Module".

The main content area displays a list of modules and activities:

- Week 4 Compare American and Chinese students' Mini-biographies and annotated pictures (Status: Complete)
- Week 5 College Life (Status: Complete)
  - Word Association: College Life 大学生生活 (Status: Complete)
  - Sentence Completion: A good student is someone who... 一个好的大学生是.... (Status: Complete)

# Limitations of Stage 2

- Lack of “real and in-depth” dialogue
  - Avoidance: “I am very careful not to offend my Chinese partner during our Skype conversations. I try to be polite and try not to touch upon dangerous topics.”
  - No deliberate risks
- The issue of motivation (extra workload)
  - “Chinese is already hard enough and the Chinese-American program definitely gives me quite some extra work.”

- Stage 3

# Improved Design of Stage 3

- Focus on sensitive topics and encourage deliberate risks
- Let the students to propose topics that they always want to discuss, but dare not talk about, that they think would offend the other culture.
  - “As a Chinese, I think Americans are often rather fake. Is being fake a norm in America?”
  - “Recently, President Xi Jinping changed the Chinese constitution. What are your opinions on this?”

# Assessment

- Transcripts of online discussion
- End-of-semester reflection journal
- End-of-semester questionnaire and interviews
- **Side-effect:** The 2017 CLTA Action Research Award



# Student Learning Outcomes

- Cultural gains
- Linguistic gains
- Intercultural communication competence (knowledge, attitudes, skills)
- Motivation
- Supportive Chinese learning community

# Challenges

- Institutional/ social
  - Time difference
  - Semester does not start at the same time
  - Class size
  - Incorporation into syllabus
  - Political censorship
- Technological
  - Technology Access
  - Wordpress.com
  - “Climb over the wall”
- Pedagogical
  - Task design: discussion vs collaborative final product
  - The role of the instructor: in-class discussion or not
  - Participation & lack of “real in-depth” dialogues
  - Other modes of communication?: Skype, WeChat, email, ...
- Financial...?

- Questions?