

# **ONLINE LEARNING AND INTERGENERATIONAL STUDENT INTERACTION**

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## **Abstract**

A multimedia English language and culture course at a Japanese university has evolved over several years from a film-based course in which students watch a film each week for language and culture learning, access homework assignments on the class film homepage, write their impressions of the film on blogs, give presentations and make videos. Also, students are added to a mailing list when they begin the course. This ML continues to be used by students even after graduating to exchange information about jobs, travel, films, meetings, further education, vocational training courses, chat, etc. This use of educational technology adds value to the basic classroom model of learning in several dimensions. First, classroom learning is extended by the online component thus accommodating different learning styles. Second, the emphasis is not just on content learning but encourages informative and affective online communication in English between students. Third, class members are able to extend their personal networks beyond their peers to students who have graduated. Fourth, the teacher gains an insight into issues affecting students.

## **1 Introduction**

In this paper, which deals with the development and teaching of a language and culture course over several years, the issues of technology in education and developing social relationships within a learning community are explored.

Language and culture has been taught in a Japanese university class through film, with the course evolving over several years, influenced in no small part by technological advances.

As a result, the course is now taught through a wide range of media using websites, films, blogs, emails and video. The course also integrates these with traditional educational conventions such as presentations, discussions, and role-playing. It has also been observed that new social groups have formed across generations who correspond largely through electronically mediated communication.

## **2 Educational Technology and Second Language Learning**

*The machine does not isolate man from the great problems of nature but plunges him more deeply into them. ~ St. Exupery*

Educational technology is affecting face-to-face second language learning more profoundly as technology grows more complex. Until a few years ago, discussions about using technology

to teach languages focused mostly on CALL or computer assisted language learning (Bush, 1997) and, to a lesser extent, video. Nowadays, the focus is less on computers themselves and more on a wider range of technologies involving concepts such as technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), or multimedia. Studies of the effects of technology on language learning range from technological descriptions to discussions of social issues with this paper falling nearer the social issues end of this spectrum.

The adoption of technology in the classroom has naturally led to many descriptions and discussions of applications which operate at the macro-level such as computer-management systems (CMS) generally focusing on WebCT, (e.g. Orsini-Jones, 2003), Blackboard (Copas, et al., 2004), or Moodle (Robb, 2004). There is an abundance of micro-level studies discussing implementations such as use of computer applications, teaching techniques using media, test results, action research, etc. (e.g. Guogas, 2003). Other studies have explored the affective elements, such as how learners feel about using technology in language learning (Danchak, 2002). The effect of technology on learning styles and strategies, the channels learners prefer and how they organize their approach is an important issue for understanding how technology may change the ways we learn (Oxford, 1990, Hismanoglu, 2000, Natusch and Edwards, 2004). The sociology of learners forming communities and emerging patterns of communication within those groups is the focus of works by researchers such as Sack (2004) and Lam (2004).

However, second language learning does not occur only within the formal setting of a classroom. Learning a language also occurs, often more effectively, outside of a classroom. As educational technology augments learning materials, increasing attention is being paid to two other typologies of learning outside formal classroom. Non-formal learning is that which occurs outside the mainstream of education and may not lead to formal qualifications like art, sports or private tutoring (Eraut, 2000, Livingston, 2001). Casual, often unintentional, maybe not even being recognized as learning by the recipient, learning gained from encounters in everyday life is what is described by Bentley (1998), and Coffield, (2000) as informal learning. This distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning has particular relevance for the following discussion.

Descriptions of typologies of formal, non-formal and informal learning have been influenced by the appearance of many distance learning and virtual school options (see Yahoo's Education site for a sample of distance learning options) and even governments in many countries initiating learning anytime, anywhere type learning programs.

What emerges from such studies is that naturally enough, the old paradigm of face-to-face classroom learning is being substantially changed as teachers begin increasingly using technology in the classroom. This impacts on course design and materials, expectations and behaviors of teachers and students, how the class is managed, what is ultimately learned, when and where it is learned, how learning outcomes might be tested, how teachers and students relate to each other. All this may ultimately result in a redefining of what happens in classrooms as is illustrated in the following description of a multimedia course.

### **3 Evolution and Description of a Multimedia Course**

*Plans are worthless, but planning is everything. ~ Dwight Eisenhower*

The team-taught multimedia course which is described in this study has its origins more than 17 years ago when one of the teachers started out using videos of films in a Japanese English language learners' classroom. The goal of the course was to illustrate life in other eras and other countries. It was designed to complement English language classes. Since then, the course has evolved with the following events incorporating technology being noteworthy:

- 1987 used video in class
- 1991 closed captioning decoder used
- 1992 videotaping of students re-enacting key scenes began
- 1997 film reviews on the Internet began to be used
- 1998 team teaching began
- 2000 began changing from using videos to DVD, mailing list began
- 2001 CALL exercises and email assignments began
- 2002 film website established
- 2003 film website and mailing list extended
- 2004 blogging began

As the course has evolved, obsolete content and technology has been discontinued and replaced with more up-to-date elements. However, the pace of change has seen an accelerating rate of adoption of new elements so, in the past two years for example, the website, the blog and the mailing list have been added. This increased rate of innovating is increasing both the teachers' workloads.

With the course becoming more complex, students also need to do more preparation. The order of tasks the students are expected to carry out each week is presented in the flowchart in Figure 1.

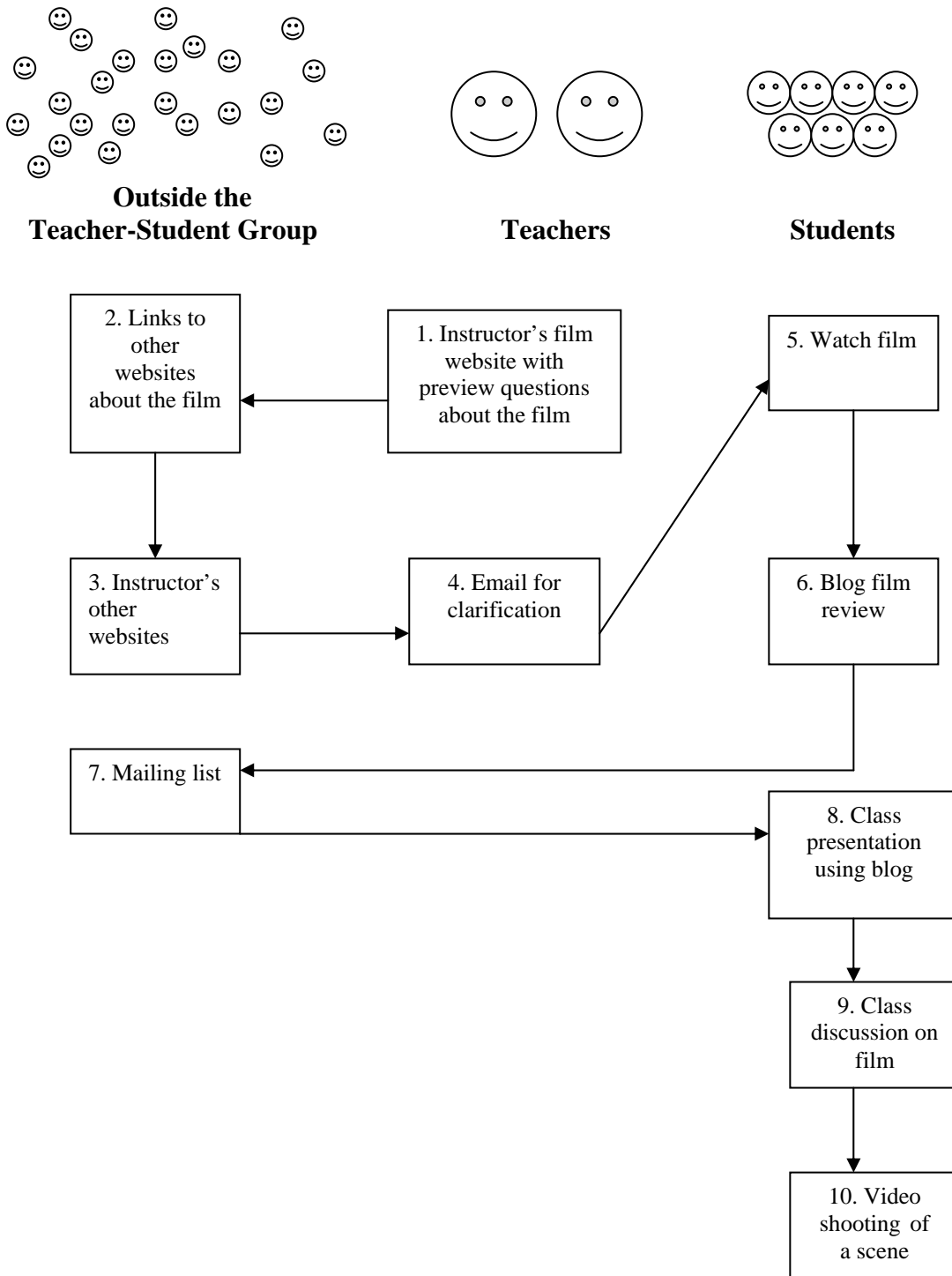


Figure 1: Components of the Multimedia Course

The process begins with the teachers assigning a film for students to view for class the following week. The films are generally “classics” in the sense that they are well-made, well-reviewed by critics and have often won awards. Table 1 lists the films used in the course. Not all the films are used every year.

<b>Film</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<i>The Ten Commandments, Prince of Egypt</i>	Egyptian and Hebrew culture, religion, slavery
<i>Ben Hur</i>	Roman and Judean culture, slavery
<i>Gladiator</i>	Roman culture, slavery, politics
<i>A Man for All Seasons</i>	monarchy, government, religion, law
<i>Shakespeare in Love</i>	Elizabethan England, literature, theater
<i>Elizabeth</i>	Elizabethan England, monarchy, politics, woman's issues
<i>The Mission</i>	religion, colonization, slavery, politics
<i>Seven Samurai</i>	Japanese feudal culture
<i>The Magnificent Seven</i>	American settlement, banditry, law
<i>Gone with the Wind, Glory</i>	plantation life, slavery, civil war
<i>Gandhi, Passage to India</i>	Indian colonization, racial discrimination
<i>Lawrence of Arabia</i>	Middle East politics, war
<i>My Fair Lady</i>	British class system, language
<i>Grapes of Wrath</i>	economics, depression, migration
<i>Tora Tora Tora, Bridge on the River Kwai</i>	Japanese-U.S.-U.K. cultural differences, misunderstandings, World War II
<i>Life is Beautiful, Tea with Mussolini, The Great Dictator, Schindler's List</i>	World War II, German-Jewish relations
<i>Mississippi Burning</i>	Racial discrimination in the U.S.
<i>Tucker</i>	Automobile industry
<i>The Insider</i>	Tobacco industry
<i>13 Days</i>	U.S. Soviet relations
<i>All the President's Men</i>	U.S. politics

Table 1: Films Used in Language and Culture Learning Course

Following the approach of establishing a schema so the film can be appreciated and understood better by students, they are encouraged to access the class film website which has pre-viewing questions relating to the historical or cultural context of the story, links to reviews of the film and general background about the film.

After viewing the film, students write a critique of the film on their personal blogs, view classmates' blogs and post comments. Skill in participating in these activities is assessed and counts towards their final grade in class. The channel of email may be used by instructors to notify changes of plan, or by students to seek clarification. Some students use the mailing list to ask students who have taken the course before for advice.

Two activities involving students' oral participation in class are presentation and discussion. Each student summarizes his or her impressions of the film each week by standing at the front of the class alongside a screen displaying his or her blog content through an overhead projector. The blog acts not only as a crutch if the student falters during presentation, but also as a second channel for other students in the class to comprehend what is being said. Some students click on links to other websites from their blog.

Some films yield dialogues which reveal useful historical or cultural insights. Short transcripts (3-5 minutes in length) of certain scenes are given to students to memorize and to

enact in groups. A week's preparation is allowed and the performances, with students modeling their performances on the diction and actions of the film actors, are videotaped.

#### 4 General Strengths and Weaknesses of the Course

*Technology presumes there's just one right way to do things and there never is.*  
~ Robert M. Pirsig

Overall, the students are very satisfied with the course. End of year student evaluations consistently report very high levels of satisfaction with many saying they have learned a lot from the course. Specifically cited features which students appreciate are:

- two instructors teaching the course
- being introduced to films they might have overlooked
- the use of films to learn about history and culture,
- having a class website to access instructional materials instead of buying a textbook
- learning how to blog
- gaining confidence in English through presentations and discussion
- acting in front of a camera

Sometimes students grumble a little about the length of the films they have to watch with some of the older classics such as *Ben Hur* being more than 3 hours long. Another murmur which sometimes emerges during class discussions is that a film seems rather old. In some cases a well-made remake provides a work-around solution for this by substituting (with reservations) for example the story of Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (1956, 220 minutes) with *The Prince of Egypt* (animation, 1998, 90 minutes). Perhaps the patience modern audiences have for watching a film is less than that of previous generations. However, students just as frequently add that they nevertheless learned something by watching old, long movies through to the conclusion.

For writing practice, blogs have proved to be more popular among teachers and students than email. In previous years, students emailed their impressions of the film to teachers but this proved cumbersome to collate and display in class. Blogs can be easily displayed on a screen, links allow instant connection to other blogs and the commenting feature fosters participation between students and another way for teachers to check which students are actively participating.

As visual support for presentations, a screen showing a static blog seems to work better particularly for students with lower English proficiency than PowerPoint, perhaps because problems of managing technology are diminished which in turn allows students to focus more on making a confident oral delivery.

Japanese students are well known for their reticence in discussion situations so the website questions act as a priming agent and students are scored with points given for every comment volunteered during the discussion sessions. A mildly coercive tactic perhaps but it produces results.

In any course with this amount of technology being used, if there is a glitch, the consequences can be annoying. Since the teachers set the room up half an hour in advance each week, and employ a team-teaching approach where one teacher can sort out technical problems while the other teacher switches to “Plan B”, time-wasting interludes have rarely occurred. Some recent problems have been occasional DVDs which won’t play in the school player (we have a zone-free backup player), a dead Internet connection (for which printed handouts can quickly be run up).

## **5 Benefits for the Students**

*Everyone is a house with four rooms, a physical, a mental, an emotional and a spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time, but unless we go into every room, every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not a complete person.*

~ Indian Proverb

As touched on in the previous section and as reported by students in their end of course evaluations, certain knowledge and skills, better understanding history and culture through well-made films, developing presentation, role-playing and acting skills, as well as doing more writing through learning how to blog, are enhanced by taking this course.

In addition to these, other knowledge and skills students have been exposed to and which are not generally picked up in the end of course evaluations (these focus on course content and instructor attitudes and behavior) include extra-curricular features.

First, because the course is technology-driven, the students tangentially receive exposure to ICT skills such as computer use, understanding viewer technology (video, CD, DVD, zones), knowledge of emerging applications on the Internet such as blogging, and some elementary HTML coding (e.g. for inserting addresses into blogs).

There are also social benefits which not only center on intra-class relationships but also links formed outside the class. Most obviously, social groups benefit when individuals have to work together on a common task such as finding a film in a video-rental store, working in groups to watch films, working in groups to act our scenes, commenting on other students’ blogs or presentations. Such social interaction occurs mainly between the class members.

However, there are also opportunities for tapping into the Internet to draw in materials to illustrate a point in an individual student’s presentation. Many students paste links to other sites into the body of their blog text. In researching the films, they access other websites beyond those recommended by the teachers. In this way they are free to choose support materials which match their own learning styles and strategies.

In addition to using the Internet to access materials outside those recommended by teachers, there is a mailing list composed of current students and all students who have taken the course before. This mailing list was set up in 2000 and each year new students’ names have been added to it. To begin with it was used by the teachers to send assignments to students but it now serves far more functions than this purely administrative one.

The uses to which students have put the mailing list run in seasonal cycles. Near the beginning and end of any year, information about social activities (class parties), or what kind of new ICT device (especially the latest mobile phone) appear. Around vacation times, tips about travel deals and movies are discussed. In the second semester, postings about companies which are holding job interviews and training courses in specialized skill areas (eg accounting, computer) appear. Members of the mailing list are widely spread; the highest concentration is in Tokyo, but several graduated students are in the provinces and some are working or studying abroad (principally the United States).

So, by going outside the class website, and using the class mailing list, the students are beginning to engage in what Sack (2000) describes as large conversations. This network of student contact has been mapped and reveals a wider range of acquaintances extending beyond the classroom. The conclusion is that the conventional formal class-learning model of teacher directed activities has developed into a broader, less formal one.

## **6 Benefits for the Teachers**

*The secret of teaching is to appear to have known all your life what you just learned this morning. ~ Author Unknown*

At the same time as the students benefit from the technological components of this course, the teachers also report added dimensions of satisfaction in teaching this class. They feel that they have gained deeper insights into the students' thinking and that presentations (short talks by students) using blogs instead of their own notes or PowerPoint have become much more interesting.

Understanding the background of students and the problems some of them face has been more possible through the increased communication using technology in this course. In particular, email and blogs have given the teachers a window onto the students' world they might not have had before. For example, students have alerted the teachers to the difficulty of finding less than mainstream films before the class meeting, allowing for replacement activities to be prepared. Another student related problems he saw in a movie scene to his difficulties with living in Tokyo away from his home prefecture and having to look after sick parents.

The mailing list is not just a useful device for students since for teachers, too, it has developed into a collection of practical and social wisdom which can be at times very useful. For example, when the time came for a student leader to be elected, some senior students, having socialized with some of the junior students, offered their views (off-line) as to a student they thought would be a good junior class leader. Just as usefully, when it came time to hold a weekend class camp, a number of locations were suggested. The feedback from graduated students was invaluable in evaluating a suitable campsite.

For one of the teachers, as retirement approaches, keeping in touch using the mailing list may offer an extension of the current vocation for maintaining an online collection of materials, keeping in touch with students, and possibly organizing a distance language learning project.

## **7 Future Technologies and their Effect on Student Learning and Social Patterns**

*The future has already arrived; it just isn't evenly distributed.* ~ William Gibson

When the course first began in 1987, video was a magical technology. As more devices and techniques have been incorporated over the years, and increasingly quickly, it is clear that such a course will not and cannot remain static. One fascinating question that remains, as yet unanswered, is what new technologies might be added? The basic configuration of one teacher standing in front of a group of students taking notes of what he says has been handed down from the Greeks and still has a role but there are many exciting components which augment teaching and learning.

As new technologies are developed and used to administer the course content, an important question concerning ongoing evaluation is what effect will these technologies have on the learning styles and strategies of the students. Associated with this are secondary issues such as are the students' socialization patterns likely to be changed?

And ultimately, what will the role of the teacher be? Will the classroom become more flexible as elements of distance learning appear? Could teachers be less tied to a classroom teaching approach? Will students learn not only from their teachers and peers but also from their senior and junior students? Overall, what has been fascinating about the evolution of this course has been the way that technology has driven the changes that have occurred.

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