Old Tools, New Media: Developing a Web-based Tutorial for Cross-cultural Learning

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Received for publication, February 12, 2003

This paper addresses the trial-and-error process of developing a software tutorial for web-based cross-cultural learning. The authors discuss the design and redesign of At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You, for which they attempted to develop (1) contents that could effectively communicate cross-cultural issues, and (2) an effective learning vehicle for those contents. Extensive reviews of early versions of the tutorial found the contents to be worthwhile and persuasive. However, the site environment was considered comparatively ineffective at communicating them. In response to feedback calling for more interactivity, the authors initiated a thorough redesign of the tutorial. This article offers an overview of the content development for At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You, summarizes the evaluation process, and details design strategies implemented to make the tutorial more interactive. The process has obliged us to consider (1) what interactivity might mean in a web environment, (2) its role in performative cross-cultural learning, and (3) whether "old tools"—methods of composition borrowed from the visual and performing arts—have a useful place in web design.

Key words: web-based cultural learning, Japanese language/culture, web-based contents, interactive web design, performance-based learning, web-based composition, motif development

INTRODUCTION

The growth of web-based learning opens up tremendous possibilities—along with numerous questions—about the feasibility of using the Net as an environment for cross-cultural learning of language and culture. One major question concerns the approach taken toward cross-cultural learning. If a performance-oriented approach is adopted, (rather than, for example, a focus on manners and customs) can the web be effectively utilized to increase the user's capacities for cultural performance? Is this use of the Net even appropriate, since the Internet has usually been viewed as a source of information and fact-based learning? Even though performance is involved in activities one does on the web (participating in chat rooms, buying and selling on e-bay, etc.) the performance itself is invariably off-line. Can performance itself be approached as a teaching focus for the Net, and if so, how?

In response to these questions this paper details the process of developing an Internet software tutorial for performative cross-cultural learning being carried out by the authors at the National Institute of Multimedia Education. The tutorial, At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You http://www.nime.ac.jp/athome/, focuses on the teaching and learning of crucial aspects of cultural performance in Japan using the web. The focus of this paper is on our learning process, which we came to see as integral to the development of the software. At the outset our principal challenge was the development of contents that could effectively communicate issues of cross-cultural performance. Contents were central and were supposed to drive everything else—design, technology and interface. But when the software tutorial initially developed by Bachnik was evaluated, it received cheers for its contents, but jeers for the way those contents were delivered. The evaluators consistently found the learning environment for the ideas less engaging than the ideas themselves. In response to this, the authors began the process of thoroughly reworking the design, technology, and graphic interface of the learning environment to better suit the contents.

Faced with trying to bring a better fit between presentation and contents (and in response to specific criticism received from the evaluators) it
was decided that building interactivity into the site would be a necessary goal of the redesign. However, doing so required grappling with what interactivity meant in this kind of environment, and how best to incorporate it into the site. From the beginning it was apparent that technical strategies and attractive pictures alone would not get us there. Rather we had to consider the user’s experience of the site, and find ways in which the user-interface might actively encourage the user to structure a unique, imaginative response to the materials and, in doing so, participate in the creation of meaning of the core ideas of the tutorial.

For that we turned to the arts, and specifically those in which compositional tools and strategies for using them are already considerably advanced. As we progressed, and found ourselves relying more frequently on such cross-disciplinary strategies, it became increasingly evident that compositional tools, time-tested in other disciplines, might be fruitfully applied to web-design as well.

This paper is organized in three sections. The first offers an overview of the content development of the web-based tutorial, At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You. The second outlines the evaluation process and how it led us to rethink the learning environment of the tutorial. The third section discusses principles that drove the redesign process, and elaborates a few of the specific tools put to use towards our goal of building a more interactive learning environment.

The decision of which sections of At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You to focus on in this paper confronted us with several difficulties. The software is extensive, organized in three parts as a series of thirteen modules, each of which contains numerous web pages. Because of the difficulties of providing in-depth analysis of moving web-based images in the space limitations of print media, we had to confine our focus to a few representative pages. We therefore chose to focus the paper on Part 1, which introduces the main themes and sets up the learning foundation for the entire tutorial. We discuss the linkage between Part 1 and the other two sections in the conclusion.

1. DEVELOPING CONTENTS FOR
AT HOME IN JAPAN: WHAT NO ONE TELLS YOU

Performative Approaches to Cross-cultural Learning

At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You was conceived by Bachnik in response to a need for performative approaches to cross-cultural learning. While teaching students abroad in Japan she became aware that a paradox existed in the cross-cultural learning process they experienced (especially those from European-based countries), which put them in difficult situations. They often failed in cross-cultural encounters with Japanese without even knowing that they had done so, because they were unprepared to recognize and cope with the cultural practices that embed indirectness and non-confrontation within the widespread cultural distinctions of *tatemae/honne* (surface appearance/inner reality); *omote/ura* (appearance/behind-the-scenes) (DOL 1986); and *uchi/soto* (inside/outside) (BACHNIIK and QUINN 1994). Thus, for example, one can find a study-abroad student in a homestay who feels the situation is going very well, while the host family may consider it a failure which they are merely enduring until the student leaves.

To respond to the difficulties of these situations the focus of cross-cultural learning in At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You is not “manners and customs”. Rather, culture is considered, in Pierre Bourdieu’s words, to be “profoundly buried” in the structures of the social world (1989: 7). This means that culture is embedded in social institutions, organizations, and the routine practices of ordinary activities so that it is carried on largely without the conscious awareness of the participants (CASTELLS 2000, GRANOVETTER 1985, BACHNIIK 2003). These practices are something like an “unwritten musical score according to which the actions of agents, each of whom believes he or she is improvising her own melody, are organized” (BOURDIEU 1990: 89). Of course no one would think to explain this “unwritten score” to a newcomer.

Consequently, those involved in sustained cross-cultural encounters are caught in a paradox: how can they become aware of the “buried” assumptions that no one thinks to tell them, but that everyone assumes they already know, before they unknowingly violate them? Delineating this dilemma as it operates for foreigners coming to live in Japan, as well as explaining the broader process of cross-cultural learning involved, is the content focus of the web-based learning tutorial, At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You.3

A major target audience for the software is Japanese language students, whether in Japan or abroad, because the cultural orientation discussed above is closely linked to a language orientation. The link between language and culture is made through performance, as in John Austin’s
celebrated description of learning a language as learning “how to do things with words” (Austin 1962). As Jerome Bruner puts this, “The child is not learning simply what to say but how, where, to whom, and under what circumstances” (Bruner 1990: 70–71). In this sense, second language learners are similar to first language learners. As Charles J. Quinn further speculates:

‘Language and culture’ is a pretty common phrase in foreign language education, and sometimes you hear, more recently, language ‘in’ culture. But we can take that a step further... and just say language ‘is’ culture, or language ‘as’ culture (Quinn 2003: 4). Where does language fit in, [then] in all this talk about performance?... We can think of performance as a way of knowing a culture. You know that culture to the extent that you can perform successfully; you can perform in a way that your intentions are understood the way you want them to be understood. That’s a way of knowing another culture. It’s a very complex business. It means knowing more than one kind of audience; it means being a master of a great variety of moves (Quinn 2003: 4).

Content Development

The context for At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You was set up as a homestay—largely because this is a fruitful context to examine the communication involved in the paradox outlined above. Homestays provide an opportunity for sustained intercultural communication that is nearly unavoidable, especially given the space constraints in most Japanese households. However, the homestay is meant to be only one example of a locus where one can encounter this paradox. Thus, while the site can be used to facilitate homestays, it is also meant to assist those coming to live in Japan in other contexts. In a broader sense, the cross-cultural learning process outlined in the site is meant to be useful for those going to live abroad anywhere.

The homestay—and the paradox that encompasses its participants—is introduced and elaborated in a page of Part 1 of the three part tutorial, through the introduction of two characters, “Peter”, a homestay student who has come to study in Japan, and the okaasan (mother) of “the Sasaki family”, Peter’s host family. The case is presented in two segments: the first takes place after a week; the second three months later, following out the homestay to its end.

Both segments are illustrated by images, arranged in two rows, under subjects such as: “room,” “furnishings,” “meals,” “going out,” “homestay from here.” Under the images two sets of perspectives of each situation are traced out, titled “Peter’s View” and “Okaasan’s View.” Taken together, the two sets of perspectives are meant to epitomize the paradoxical situation involving unspoken cultural expectations outlined above. Thus Peter takes the family’s spoken communication too literally, and misses many of their unspoken messages, thereby creating considerable problems. The host family members, on their part, unknowingly expect that Peter will grasp their unspoken messages much as a Japanese guest would (see Fig. 1). The second segment of the homestay case, presented later in the tutorial, traces out the consequences of perpetuating this communication throughout the homestay. At the end of three months, Peter feels

Peter's View:
The meals are great, and my only complaint could be that they feed me too much.

Okaasan's View:
I am worried about whether he is satisfied with Japanese cooking, and whether he's getting enough food.

Fig. 1. Homestay perspectives, early version
the homestay has gone well. The host family, on
the other hand, feel it has gone badly and are
frustrated and disappointed with the situation.

Following the introduction of the case, the next
page of the tutorial begins to explain how the
radically different perspectives on the same
homestay experienced by the homestay student
and the host family are not only possible, but in
fact, perfectly normal in cross-cultural encounters
such as these. Each side was trying his/her best
to do things "right"—as they saw things. What
went wrong is explained through a replication of
some of the double sets of images from the
previous page, along with an explanation of what is
"said" versus what is "unsaid" in each of their
communications, followed by the "gaps" and
problems created by misunderstandings on both
sides of the "unsaid."

This page is crucial as it sets up the basis of
explanation for the entire tutorial. The "said/unsaid"
explanation constitutes the core of Part 1, which
introduces the user to the cross-cultural learning
process developed in the software. In the original
version, this explanation was textual, with
occasional graphic illustrations, such as the
"cultural bubbles" which are shown to encase
Peter and the host family and impede their
communication. (See Fig. 2)

The Sasaki’s unspoken communication is
distorted by Peter’s cultural bubble, just
as Peter’s unspoken communication is
distorted by the Sasaki’s cultural bubble.

Fig. 2. Communication bubbles, early version

However, extensive evaluations of the site, by
both teachers and students of Japanese language,
led us to realize that the learning environment of
the tutorial didn’t work effectively to communicate
its contents. A brief summary of the evaluations
follows.

2. EVALUATING AT HOME IN JAPAN:
WHAT NO ONE TELLS YOU

Part 1 of the tutorial was evaluated frequently
throughout the initial process of its creation.
There were four evaluation groupings, consisting of:

1. 7 students taking Japanese at a major
   U.S. university
2. 8 students at a study--abroad program in
   Japan run by another major U.S.
   university
3. 12 members of an ATJ (Association of
   Teachers of Japanese) summer workshop
   in Japan, who taught Japanese at all
   educational levels in the U.S.
4. 13 members of a research group
   (kenkyukai), based at NIME, of whom
   the majority taught Japanese in Japanese
   universities

All of the evaluations were qualitative, allowing
for users to give feedback on various aspects of
the site, although quantitative questions were
included in three of the four evaluation
instruments. After completing their written
evaluations the ATJ group also met with the
author for two hours and gave substantial oral
feedback on the site.

The evaluations of all of the groups above were
remarkably consistent, even though they took
place at various points throughout the web
development process. Both teachers and students
found the ideas the site was communicating to be
both useful and worthwhile. Students felt the
tutorial would help them navigate pitfalls of
cultural orientation and some reported that it
already had helped them. For example, in
response to the question, “Would visiting this site
make your homestay easier/more successful? One
student at a study abroad program in Japan,
responded, “Yes! . . . it offers a great starting
point, so that students may be able to begin with a
greater understanding of culture than some
students who have completed homestays.”

Nearly 100% of the respondents thought the
case of Peter’s homestay with the Sasaki family
was clear, and they were able to grasp the cultural
communication problems the case was illustrating.
The overwhelming majority (91% of the students in
group 1) wanted to continue to the rest of the site
(Parts 2 and 3). Both groups of Japanese teachers
found the ideas the site was teaching to be
valuable and worth teaching, and several of the
Japanese teachers tried teaching with the site and
contributed detailed written feedback on what
they found useful.

But while the evaluations on content were
overwhelmingly positive, all four groups of
evaluators were also consistent in finding the site
environment for the ideas less exciting than the
ideas themselves. In the same group in which 91%
wanted to read further, those who rated the site design “interesting” dropped to 74%. As another student in the study abroad program in Japan put this: “Something could be done to reverse the grade school textbookish quality the site sometimes contains. [But] the ideas are wonderful!”

The ATJ group 3 were the most explicit about this gap, in their meeting in July, 2002. They all found the tutorial design to be too text–oriented, and lacking interactivity. They wanted more active involvement in the learning process, and more graphics. In other words they liked what the site was teaching, but they wanted to learn differently, and felt the site would be more effective if they could do so. The evaluations pushed us largely in one direction—to redesign the site as a better learning vehicle for the ideas it was supposed to communicate. Eventually this led us to shift from a text–based to a student–centered presentation of the “said/unsaid” ideas. The following section details the redesigning process of the site.

3. REDESIGNING THE SOFTWARE TO PROMOTE INTERACTIVITY

In redesigning the site, we endeavored to retain the core ideas about performed, embedded culture, but to rethink and reshape the environment that would serve as a vehicle for those ideas. In short, we wanted the site to be more interactive. It was therefore necessary to grapple with what exactly interactivity meant in a web environment, other than an increased number of mouse clicks. Only then could we entertain what kind of changes would be most suitable.

For our purposes, interactivity came to mean the manner and degree to which the user is encouraged to participate in the meaning–making of the site while in the process of using it. In practical terms this meant reducing the text, increasing graphic illustrations, and adding opportunities for the user to play an active role in navigating the site. But illustrations and mouse prompts on their own do not necessarily make a site more interactive, at least not in the sense of encouraging the user to take an active role in the meaning–making. A more important facet of interactivity is the manner in which the user gradually “builds” the meaning of the site, through cumulative interactions with the site environment. Thus the redesign process focuses on encouraging greater participation by the user, not just in navigating the site materials, but also in creating meaning with those materials. This in turn led us to consider the user’s experience of the site, and search for ways of composing and framing a user’s interaction with the materials to account for and encourage a unique, imaginative response.

Compositional tools used in disciplines such as music composition, choreography and play writing suggest possibilities for structuring works, and for elaborating and developing recognizable motifs. Throughout the revising process, it became increasingly evident that such tools, time–tested in other disciplines, might be fruitfully applied to web–design as well. Moreover, we addressed our goal of increased interactivity through overlapping textual, technical and visual strategies. In the revised version much of the written text was condensed, and elaborate explanations were eschewed in favor of more concise language that would be juxtaposed against suggestive visual accompaniment.

Technically, we introduced Flash® technology to allow some of the visual images to move or otherwise be transformed by the user in the course of navigating the site. But throughout the redesign process, it has been consideration of compositional strategies for framing, highlighting and advancing the core ideas of the site that have driven the commissioning of illustrations, the selection of technology platforms and, of course, the visual layout. In order to demonstrate what this process has been yielding, we will detail a representative section of the updated design, and a portion of the process that got us there.

The web page that traces the source of miscommunications between Peter and the Sasaki family is crucial because it acts as a foundation for many of the ideas elaborated later in the tutorial. In the earliest versions of the site, this page consisted of extensive textual explanation with only occasional supportive illustrations, such as the one in Fig. 2, above.

Contrast this with the revised version, in which illustrations are used not just to support the ideas in the site but in many cases to advance them. Explanatory text has been severely reduced from several pages to two short paragraphs that precede a Flash® sequence (see Fig. 3). What is more, rather than a static image to accompany the text, images now evolve and transform, advancing the ideas being discussed, step by step, with repeated prompts by the user.
How Communication Works
(click here)

Now let's see how Peter and the Sasaki family's Communication works
(click here)

Peter and the Sasaki family's
How Communication Works

When Peter arrived, his host family told him... (click on okasan)

Fig. 3. Communication Bubbles—Flash® version
When Peter arrived his host family told him...

Make yourself at home

I'm free to do my own thing

But what okaasan meant was...
The unspoken background produces very different meanings for the same words. For example
Fig. 3 offers several stop motion frames of one excerpt of the Flash© environment developed for this section, beginning with visual presentations of "Spoken Language" and "Unspoken Assumptions," under the heading, "How Communication Works" (See Fig. 3 frames 1–4). Next, the scripted words, "Peter and the Sasaki family" are inserted into the heading (frame 5), and icons of the two lead characters appear on either side of the page (frame 6). When the user clicks on the okaasan icon, "Make yourself at home" appears in the spoken communication balloon, indicating that she has spoken these words (frames 7–8).

Next the user clicks on the Peter icon and the spoken words are surrounded by Peter’s interpretation: "I’m free to do my own thing," which appears as a bubble surrounding the words (frame 9). The user is then prompted to click again on the okaasan icon and a different interpretation appears in a bubble now surrounding the same words but this time coming from the okaasan. "Peter’s actions should fit in with the family" (frame 10–11). The sequence, which takes no more than a minute or so to perform, ends with a two-toned bubble surrounding okaasan’s words, “make yourself at home” (frame 12), indicating that the spoken background produces very different meanings for the same words. Following this, the Flash© sequence continues to develop the discussion of the unspoken communication process between Peter and the Sasaki family, by elaborating how each thinks the other understood his/her words, followed by further examples and quizzes. This page ends up with Peter and the Sasaki family in a similar state to the way we encountered them in Fig. 2: enclosed within their “unsaid” bubbles. But in the revised version the reader should be much better able to understand how they got there.

To appreciate the role compositional strategies are playing in redesigning the tutorial, it may be helpful to consider a few samples of the tools put to use in the redesign process, and how they work. The remainder of this section of the paper will be devoted to a few of the “old tools” that are assisting us in advancing our goal of making the site more interactive.

Identifying Motif

The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines motif as “a short figure of characteristic design that recurs throughout a composition or a section as a unifying element” (Apel 1972: 545).

How does this work? When a viewer, listener or reader encounters a recognizable motif in a new environment, whether the medium is a film, a performance or a poem, she is invited to recall material introduced earlier. Careful use of motif can make a piece of work more enjoyable and engaging. It can also make it more interactive, provided the motif succeeds in encouraging a “reader” to infer meaning from the interrelation of the works’ components. Selecting and making such inferences—Wolfgang Iser calls this “consistency building” (1974: xiv)—is a unique and creative act by the individual audience member, spectator, reader, or in this case, website user.

The case of Peter and the Sasaki family is rich with opportunities to identify and elaborate motifs. Take, for example, the “bubble” motif, which you have encountered already in Figures 2 and 3. Both earlier and later versions of the site make reference to the coined phrase, “cultural bubble.” In the earlier version, the communication difficulties between Peter and the Sasaki family were depicted visually by an illustration of Peter holding an American flag and enclosed within a large bluish soap bubble. The Sasaki family was also shown huddled together inside a similar looking bubble, with curved and jagged arrows connecting the two bubbles and representing the paths of their mutual misunderstanding (see Fig. 2).

In the later version, the bubble motif is picked up and developed considerably. Bubbles are used to illustrate the distinction between “spoken language” and “unspoken assumptions.” But whereas this distinction is explained textually in the earlier version, in the revised version, both spoken and unspoken aspects are depicted as bubbles, and the bubbles are marked by slight hues to allow the user to distinguish between okaasan’s (pink), Peter’s (blue), perspectives. This motif allows the user to visualize the communication process—and from this to build inferences on how it is that Peter and the okaasan don’t understand each other’s words.

In the following section of the revised version (not pictured here) the bubble motif returns. There are bubble-encased quiz questions dealing with the misunderstandings that have accrued thus far, and as one scrolls down, one discovers icons of Peter and the okaasan, each holding a small child’s bubble wand, blowing away in cheerful oblivion. Thus they eventually end up encased within the bubbles they are blowing, apparently unaware of their predicament.

“Bubble” is only one of many motifs that were identified and developed in the course of revising
the website. The power of repeating a motif is that each time it returns, the user is invited to recall the circumstances of previous sightings, and the motif becomes charged with increasing significance. It may even become a shorthand for complex ideas. If not used carefully, however, repetition can be boring and the image can lose its force.

Consideration of compositional strategies obliges us to take into account that identifying and repeating motif is therefore not enough. Repetition of images without development tends to grow boring, dulling the senses rather than sharpening them. Therefore, motif development is a crucial factor in compositional strategies that rely on identifiable motifs. One or two examples may show how this issue may be addressed via our bag of old tools.

**Developing Motif**

Both versions of the site make reference to Peter and the *okaasan*'s contrasting views of the elaborate meals she prepares in honor of the newly arrived houseguest. Peter writes to his friend, "[t]he meals are great, and my only complaint could be that they feed me too much." By contrast, the Sasaki *okaasan* wonders whether Peter is satisfied with her cooking or getting enough food. The reference to food in the text invites a visual counterpart. In earlier versions the contrasting illustrations first show Peter stuffed, having just finished a meal, then *okaasan* in the act of preparing a meal. Both illustrations reflect and parallel the accompanying text. In commissioning new illustrations for the revised version, we first identified the prepared meal as a motif, then considered ways the recognizable image might be developed to advance our narrative. This process presented us with a number of options. What we settled on would be called a *transformation* in compositional terms: A recognizable motif (the meal as Peter sees it) is transformed in a manner that it is still recognizable, but in a new form.

In the revised version we now see an elaborately cooked meal as Peter might see it sitting in front of him. Then, in the adjacent illustration, we are confronted (as, presumably, *okaasan* is) with the same plates and pots dirtied and assembled into a formidable, unceremonious stack (see Fig. 4). This is one example of a specific tool (transformation) being used in motif development.

A closer look at this innocent pairing reveals another compositional trick at play in the apparent contrast between, for example, what *okaasan* says and the accompanying image. By revising the illustrations according to strategies of motif development, we were able to introduce a contrast between the words, ("I am worried about whether he is...getting enough to eat") and accompanying illustration (stack of dirty dishes), suggesting the *okaasan* may have more on her mind than Peter's satisfaction. This is but one of many subtle instances in which a slight *dissonance*, was introduced in the relationship between text and image. Deliberately introducing gaps and dissonance are compositional strategies to invite inferences on the part of the user of the site, and to allow the visual component to advance, rather than just reinforcing, the meaning. Bridging the gaps and resolving dissonance between what the user reads and sees becomes an interactive reading strategy that invites her to infer more about *okaasan*’s and Peter’s predicament than the text overtly explains (Foley 1995; Iser 1974).

![Peter's View:](image1)

*Peter's View:*
The meals are great, and my only complaint could be that they feed me too much.

![Okaasan's View:](image2)

*Okaasan's View:*
I am worried about whether he’s satisfied with Japanese cooking, and whether he’s getting enough food.

![Fig. 4. Homestay perspectives, revised illustrations](image3)
Tools such as these for sequencing, developing and otherwise reworking motif, or for deliberately inviting inferences, are sometimes called compositional devices. In dance, choreographers borrow compositional devices freely from other arts such as music (e.g., transposition, retrograde), film (e.g., splicing, insertion) and even writing (synecdoche, metonymy). Strategies for using such devices are freely altered as the medium changes, and according to the resourcefulness of the music composer, choreographer, poet or web–designer. Their uses are not fixed to a single method, or even within a single discipline. For example, a sequencing tool known as accumulation—the repetition of a sequence of items, ABCDE, varying the starting point (such as in the following: A, AB, ABC, ABCD, etc., or E, CDE, ABCDE)—is a common device for dance choreographers, but it also may be used as a device for transforming a sequence or phrase of music, or a line of poetry. The Flash© sequence shown in Figure 3 was developed as a visual and temporal accumulation. When the sequence was being conceived, steps were taken to shape the flow of images to allow the viewer to recognize a previous starting point in the evolving image.

The tools described in this section, such as accumulation, transformation, and dissonance, are all tension–building. They are crucial in engaging the website user in an active meaning–making process, while also setting the stage for the sections that follow. Taken as a whole, the user of the site now finds much of the textual explanation replaced by illustrations or Flash© sequences, and is repeatedly invited to make inferences from the interrelation of the visual components.

CONCLUSION:

LINKING PERFORMANCE TO INTERACTIVITY

At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You focuses on a challenge posed by a paradox of cross–cultural learning: How can students abroad become aware of crucial "unsaid" aspects of culture that are essential to know, but which no one thinks to tell them, before they unknowingly violate them? The article examines the appropriateness of the Internet as an environment for performance–oriented cross–cultural learning. Can the Net be used to enable sojourners abroad to cope with the paradoxical challenge above?

Our response to this question is a qualified yes, and is based on the trial–and–error learning process the authors underwent in producing and revising the software. To date this process includes an initial version, evaluations, and a revised second version (not yet ready for evaluation).

The first version of the software received high marks for its contents. But the learning environment was judged to be less successful. From this we realized the necessity of building our orientation not only into the contents, but into the learning environment as well, including design, technology, and graphic interface.

The focus on performance in cross–cultural learning contents then led us to look more closely at the meaning of "interactivity" in software design, and to question especially how interactivity could be linked to performance–oriented learning. We arrived at the conclusion that we had to carefully consider the user’s experience of the materials in constructing the tutorial, and encourage her to actively participate in the creation of meaning–making via the tutorial.

But to do this we had to reconsider the focus of interactivity to be something more than just increasing the number of mouse clicks or creating more learning tasks to be carried out by the user. As we came to see interactivity as a facet of student–centered learning, we realized that if we wanted to make the software student–centered then we needed to encourage the user to "build" upon the meaning of the site for herself, through cumulative interactions with the site materials and environment.

To this end, we represented the paradox of cross–cultural learning in a homestay situation, through the interplay of text and images that evolve on a Flash© platform. The user learns through the dynamic process of grasping and building upon core concepts, while progressing through the tutorial at her own pace. Throughout the process of navigating the tutorial, the user is encouraged to play an active role in structuring meaning, through numerous opportunities for inferring increasingly complex relationships between the ideas presented and the images, characters and situations that are the vehicle for those ideas.

Because of the active role of the user in the learning environment of the site, the apparent failure of the homestay situation presented in Part 1 becomes a catalyst for further learning (in Parts 2 and 3) rather than a suggestion that homestays fail. This is because the learning environment of the software encourages the user to grasp the very dimensions of the homestay communication failures that eluded Peter and the Sasaki family. Although space constraints did not allow us to include discussions of Parts 2 and 3 in this paper,
these parts are designed to give the user more tools for building the “unsaid” aspects of meaning in Japanese communication situations. Part 2 develops further awareness of “unsaid” cultural dimensions by linking the distinctions between “said/unsaid” with the commonly occurring cultural distinctions of tatemae/honne (surface appearance/inner reality); omote/ura (appearance/behind—the-scenes) and uchi/soto (inside/outside) in a variety of situations. Following this, Part 3 presents a series of actual homestay cases, which demonstrate how mutual awareness of the “unsaid” dimensions can actually “build” understanding between host families and homestay students. In the manner of “looking over the shoulders” of case—participants, (in Part 3) and having behind—the-scenes aspects of the cases explained, (in Part 2), the user is enabled to identify and ultimately perform the various “moves” that are part of knowing a culture (QUINN 2003).

Our progress thus far in building software that will allow this kind of meaning—making suggests an important link between performance—oriented learning approaches and interactive learning environments. There is also a budding and cooperative relationship between old tools and new media. The leap from stage to screen, from artful composition to web design, is a short and arguably a necessary one. If we wish the user of a website to be a participant in the meaning making, it is crucial to have interesting and useful content material. But this is not enough. The presentation of the material must also be consistent with and advance that larger goal. Applying compositional methods and principles has at the very least, given us a means to pursue our goal of making the site more interactive. This should come as promising news to aspiring website designers who, faced with the long road that separates new technology and its potential application, may take heart in finding that with regard to composition, at least, they do not have to reinvent the wheel.

NOTES

1) Jane M. BACHIKIN, Ph.D., is a cultural anthropologist specializing on Japan, whose research at NIME focuses on creating educational software for cross-cultural learning. She has taught in a number of study—abroad programs in the Tokyo area, while a faculty member at NIME. Thomas K. O’CONNOR is an actor and movement artist researching performative learning strategies at NIME. He studied composition in the Department of Dance at the Ohio State University.

2) The initial process of web conceptualization and design for At Home in Japan: What No One Tells You took place at The Ohio State University, in the U.S., in 1997—98. I am grateful to Diane Birckbickler, the director of the National Foreign Language Institute, and to James Unger, Chairman of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures for their support for the project. I am also grateful to Mari Noda, Steven J. Nussbaum, Charles J. Quinn, Elisabeth Farrar and Diane Dageforde for assisting in the initial designing, conceptual formulation, and evaluation of the site. The site was then further developed at NIME, which provided a considerable variety of support. I am grateful to a kenkyukai (research group) which evaluated and used the site for teaching, as well as to Anthony Ogden of the Institute for International Education of Students (IES) Tokyo Center for helping with support including student evaluations. Finally, we thank the anonymous reviewers who provided comments which were very helpful to us in rewriting this paper.

3) This paradox is not peculiar to Japan. One encounters it as a newcomer to any society, as well as in subcultures within one’s own society. Thus newcomers to a workplace can experience this paradox, and it is experienced even more by marriage partners from different cultures or sub-cultures. The web tutorial can thus be useful to newcomers in any culture (or subculture) who need to understand “unsaid” communication dynamics.

REFERENCES CITED


