

# An Activity Theory Approach to Contradictions in Intercultural Telecollaboration

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## Abstract

This qualitative participatory study explores contradictions that emerged in a telecollaborative project linking two groups of participants: 11 teacher-learners of a TESOL graduate program in Korea and 24 graduate students of an educational psychology course in the United States. Drawing on data from self-reflection essays, interview, online transcripts, and end-of-semester questionnaires, I document main contextual tensions that arose from the different socially and culturally situated attitudes, beliefs, and expectations that informed students' communicative choices.

**Keywords:** Computer-Mediated Communication, Telecollaboration, Activity Theory, Network-Based Teaching

## 1. Introduction

Recent research on telecollaboration has explored the kinds of cultural contact afforded by internet-mediated communication tools. Special attention in current studies is paid to tensions and contradictions that might arise in these international learning partnerships [1, 2, 3]. For example, it is difficult to resolve misunderstandings online because there are differences in social and institutional aspects of online learning [1]. Participants must negotiate different understandings of the purpose of online forums [2]. In summary, previous studies revealed that telecollaboration does not automatically

enhance collaborative learning that educators anticipate. In this study, I contribute to recent research on the tensions that can arise from telecollaboration by investigating factors that contributed to limited interaction among students from Korea and the US. Further, previous studies mainly focused on language-exchange task-based assignments that dealt with discussion of texts among students from the US texts among students from the US learning European languages and their European counterparts learning English [4, 5].

In comparison, the current study involved English teachers who engaged in online interaction in English on the assigned topics of a content course. The current study employs the activity theory framework [6, 7] with the key concepts of mediation, contradictions, culture, and cognition. Therefore, this study attempts to provide an additional avenue to explore intercultural tensions.

## 2. Activity Theory and Contradictions

Given that activity theory has the premise that cognitive development has a cultural and social origin [7], the theory allows for breaking down the interrelationship between the structure and agency into smaller categorical elements, "socio-cultural matrix" [8] and trace the developmental path of that relationship.

Mediation that is defined as "the mechanism through which external socio-cultural activities are transformed into internal mental functioning" can take the

form of visual materials, classroom discourse, instruction, or other kinds of teacher assistance.

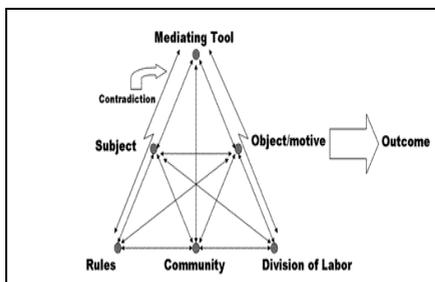


Fig. 1: Activity System Model [6]

As individuals participate in many activity systems within their local and global contexts, international telecollaboration is one type of activity system which is embedded within wider institutional and historical contexts. Engeström defined an activity system as “a virtual disturbance-and-innovation-producing machine” and emphasized the significance of contradictions that drive these changes.

According to Engeström, a contradiction is seen as “a societally essential dilemma which cannot be resolved through separate individual actions alone – but in which joint cooperative actions can push a historically new form of activity into emergence”. Also contradiction indicates a misfit not only between different developmental phases of a single activity, but between different activities [8]. For example, different contradictions in international telecollaboration can occur not only due to the differences in students’ frames of reference, but due to the mismatch of activities in two different contexts.

### 3. Methodology

I did a hybrid qualitative participatory research and teacher research. This qualitative study took place over the course of one semester. I developed a classroom-

based, qualitative study that linked 2 university graduate students in Korea and in the United States. The telecollaborative partnership under study involved 3 online exchanges between two graduate courses (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of Telecollaboration

	Dates	Topics
1st Forum	Sept 21-23	Teacher education
2nd Forum	Oct 19-21	Strategic learning
3rd Forum	Nov 16-18	Role of context

Using Blackboard that allows for asynchronous discussions, students were assigned to four groups of 5-6 partners to discuss texts related to the course topic with a focus on education and learning. Students were encouraged to read all the postings in each group but were required to post their writing within their own assigned group.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

### 4.1. Intra-Cultural Tensions

#### 4.1.1 Contradictions of Posting

Students of the two graduate courses in Korea and in America equally experienced anxiety at the beginning of the project because of their unawareness of what to expect from the communication partners. Kyung-a, a Korean teacher, for example, wrote:

At the beginning of the online forms I was a little nervous; I didn’t know what to write and how to respond to others’ postings. However, I was able to become familiar with the new way of discussion. (Self-reflection essay, Dec 12, 2010)

At the beginning of the project Kyung-a was not sure of what to write about because online participation in interaction with students from America was entirely

new for her. Joe, an American student, also experienced inner tension at the beginning because he was afraid of seeming “strange” due to irreconcilable differences of local classroom culture between Korea and the US. He wrote in his essay: My contributions to the online forum were meager at first. I felt a little self-conscious. I did not know the other international students yet and I felt my opinion down to a minimum.

Their anxiety began to disappear when they started to interact online and found more about the project. This shows how the participants’ inner tensions were resolved during “the living movement” [6].

In addition to contradictions associated with the novelty of the online written discourse, some American students experienced contradiction related to their lack of technological experience: I was trying to save my post while re-reading other comments, but this didn’t work. I suddenly felt awkward and uncomfortable (John).

#### **4.1.2 Contradictions of Formality**

Students often faced dilemma with regards to the choice of the level of formality. Aaron’s comment demonstrates his confusion with the degree of formality: The postings were sometimes summaries of the articles and other times they were just simple comments. I did try to find a posting that made me want to respond. (Reflection essay, Dec 13, 2010)

Because the online forum was a part of students’ academic courses, some students faced a dilemma fostered by the interplay between their non-academic positions and discursively constructed institutional roles of the classroom. Joyce expressed her concern about this issue: ... when we’d been required to post once and respond once on Bb, we all wrote comments that were more like mini-thesis statements! ... I was a little anxious about what kind of comment I needed to make.

As Joyce realized that each posting was an encapsulated thought with an argument and critical thinking, she wondered if that’s the kind of commenting she was to do.

## **4.2. Inter-Cultural Tensions**

### **4.2.1 Contradictions of Contribution**

It is important to note that almost all new threads were initiated by students from the US. Based on culture-specific differences in the structure of American and Korean university-level classroom, Korean students are not socialized to actively participate in discussions within individual courses in the same way that Americans are. Hana, a teacher-learner in Korea, said in the interview: Honestly, my focus was mainly on my own writing. I was not so enthusiastic about responding to others’ postings because I was not accustomed to academic discussion itself.

However, this is not solid enough to make a conclusion that unequal contribution emerged in the project. Rather analysis of messages identified that students from Korea and the US posted messages of similar length. One might anticipate that students in the American class would have been actively involved in posting longer messages. In their reflection essays, students on both sides agreed that they wanted to “write complete and comprehensive responses rather than conversational patterns because it was easier for them to keep track of complete thoughts.”

### **4.2.2 Contradictions of Instructor Role**

Data from the study illustrate striking differences of opinion in students’ expectations of the teacher role in online forums.

Students from the US showed differing opinions. Some of them felt that the American course instructor was not responsive enough.

As Anita expressed her concern, “As the expert, I felt she would be able to provide more insight and make sure that

we were heading in the right direction.” Further, Andrew, an American student, voiced disappointment with the teacher role in the online discussions. As he mentioned: I thought the teacher distracted online discussions because it seemed like others wanted to engage her in a discussion since they recognized her as a more knowledgeable other.

As American students tend to have more opportunities to participate in electronic learning communities in the US university and therefore might have higher expectations of teacher role to meet specific learning goals in the class.

Other students in the US thought that the teacher’s responsiveness was appropriate and beneficial: I liked that she often initiated the discussion and provided explanations and feedback.

In comparison, students from Korea were strikingly unanimous evaluating the American teacher involvement as higher. They felt that the American teacher was actively involved to online discussion, appreciating her participation in the discussions. As Jin-su, a Korean student said in the interview: I believe I got some of my ideas from reading her comments to other students. Plus, it was also helpful to have the expert point of view.

## 5. Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on exploring contradictions that arise from intercultural telecollaboration from the perspective of activity theory. The study found two levels of contradictions: intracultural ones that represented participants’ common assumptions and beliefs during the telecollaborative activity; inter-cultural ones that were varied with

respect to localized academic cultures on both sides.

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