Using an interactive art education application to promote cultural awareness: a case study from Turkey

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Abstract
In this study interactive technologies were used to promote cultural awareness. A series of five interactive art lessons was developed and carried out with 47 primary students at a private school in Turkey. The lessons included use of the Internet, asynchronous video conferencing, e-mail chatting. The students participated in an interactive learning experience with peers in Canada over a period of three weeks in which they exchanged cultural images and an instructional CD. They were interviewed later to examine their impressions. Most students stated that the interactive art lessons involving audio-visual technologies had encouraged learning and promoted higher levels of understanding. A considerable number had changed their views about culture. They liked learning about student viewpoints from other countries and mentioned that combining traditional and new technologies this way increases cross-cultural interaction.

Keywords
interactive art education technology cultural awareness

Background
In the twenty-first century, students need to understand technological possibilities for solving unique and complex problems. Technology is a place where they can have fun whilst exploring new learning opportunities. It also gives them control over their learning. It increases learning opportunities when it is used effectively, but this depends on how it is integrated into schools (Dodge, Colker and Heroman 2002). Technology also has potential to increase awareness of cultural diversity, provide opportunities for cultural enrichment and enable a global perspective. Research has consistently demonstrated its value in enhancing student achievement (Schacter 1999; Sivin-Kachala and Bialo 1994).

Culture shapes individuals’ views of the world and how to interpret it. It defines us and we define it. We absorb, and then come to know our own cultural behaviour and recognize cultural difference through education (Pang 2001). While culture is specific to a particular community, it can be shared with other nations and peoples; furthermore it can be re-interpreted. Cultural understanding and awareness can be developed. Because educational institutions play a key role in this process, designing appropriate curricula to address this aim is important (Fantini 1995). Generally speaking, students find learning more meaningful when it connects to their life outside school. Intercultural awareness increases through interaction and communication with people from other cultures. Creating interaction
between cultures is important educationally also because this facilitates a multicultural and global world-view.

In modern societies both art and technology function as a means for people to come to understand their own identities, cultures and traditions in addition to communicating with each other. Art lessons offer opportunities for students from diverse cultural backgrounds to come to understand each other’s behaviour and develop awareness of the cultural mosaic that characterizes most contemporary societies (Dawn and Southcott 2006). Technology provides a variety of multimedia opportunities to facilitate appreciation of other cultures (Feldman 2000). Involving children in the process of creating interactive forms of instruction also increases their interest in cultural learning. Educators who encourage such approaches subscribe to the view that cultural variation should be represented and transmitted in the school system in order for children to accept it in any given society (Barry, Poortinga, Segal and Dasen 1992).

The quest for meaningful learning experiences in the twenty-first century is important. Students today need critical thinking skills, along with ability to interact with people from many cultural backgrounds. Integrating technological opportunities into school curricula facilitates such endeavours. First, it equips them with the skills to communicate and collaborate with peers around the world. Second, it prepares them for the information society they live in. Third, it provides opportunities to experience new learning contexts and connect to other cultures. When ICT is integrated into curricula the teacher’s role changes to that of finding ways of engaging students in interactive learning processes. According to Iwami (2001) their main role in this context is to coordinate interaction between participants. Students can engage with cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural curriculum content using the interactive functions computer networks provide.

Scope of the study
The present study was an experimental art programme designed to increase cultural awareness and understanding of students in Turkey. It used the interactive functions provided by computer networks and information and communication technologies (ICT) and students painted and photographed cultural themes. A sequence of interactive art lessons was designed with an ITC component that included use of the Internet, a video conferencing, chat, a web page and creation of an instructional CD. The researcher designed the programme together with Turkish students attending a private primary school. She studied and evaluated the way they created and expressed cultural meanings in their artworks and gathered data from both the Turkish and some Canadian students that helped her to evaluate the programme. The research was implemented between May and June 2007.

Methods and procedures
Participants
The participants were third-and fourth-grade primary-school students from Cagdas Primary School in Turkey and W.H. Day Elementary School in Canada. Data was gathered about the experiment in the form of photographs, audio and video recordings and semi-structured interviews. The programme had three phases: the first took the form of an awareness-raising workshop; in
the second Turkish and Canadian students interacted with each other through e-mail, chat, video, photo and drawings shared on the Internet. In the third phase, the Turkish students created an interactive CD about Turkish and Canadian culture and sent it to the Canadian students. (The digital tools used to create the interaction between the Turkish and Canadian students were computers, video cameras, the Internet, e-mail, chatting, file-sharing programmes, websites http://whd.scdsb.on.ca, http://www.ozelcagdas.k12.tr, and web sites about Turkish culture and a culturally oriented instructional CD.) During the intervention the researcher and two teachers in Turkey and Canada guided and supported students technically. At the end, the Turkish students were interviewed about the interactive lessons. Before the data collection began, approval of students, school administration, families and teachers was obtained. For ethical reasons, all the names have been changed in this report.

The first awareness-raising session in the Turkish school lasted 45 minutes. The researcher and a teacher introduced students to the concept of culture and asked them to research Turkish cultural themes on the Internet and to download some images. Next they asked them discuss and interpret these materials. Finally they were asked to choose and draw pictures representing Turkish culture. The same procedure was followed in the Canadian school.

In the second phase, the Canadian and Turkish students were introduced to each other via e-mail. They questioned each other about their cultures and exchanged visual images they had created, and video files using file-sharing programmes. The Turkish children looked at cultural images featured on the Canadian school website as well as reflecting on the personal materials the Canadian students sent. After this, the Turkish students were asked to draw ‘Canadian cultural themes’.

In the last phase, the researcher and Turkish students prepared an interactive CD designed to introduce Canadian students to Turkish culture. The content, chosen after a brainstorming discussion, featured national and religious holidays, national heroes and traditional places and customs. The students’ drawings were scanned and added to video messages.

The interactive CD transmitted the following aspects of Turkish culture: village life, historical objects and places, customs and traditions, traditional sports, meals and clothing, folk dances, and festivals and ceremonies; and the students also provided feedback about what they had learned about Canadian culture. The material in the interactive CD was organised into three sections. The first contained information the students had compiled about Turkish heroes and festivals and included photos, traditional music and text. The second part was a virtual exhibition of student artwork covering these themes, with titles and short explanations. Some drawings by Turkish students of Canadian culture were included also as a surprise. The third section was devoted to videos and images intended to help the Canadian students get to know their Turkish peers better. Drawings the Canadian students exchanged were posted in this section also. The videos consisted of short messages the Turkish students wanted to deliver to their Canadian peers.

The CD was sent to the Canadian students using an Internet relay file-sharing programme. The Canadian students prepared a similar CD with information about their school and thoughts about Turkish culture.
Figure 1: Interactive instructional tool.
The Turkish students were observed, photographed and videotaped throughout the programme. Following the practical sessions, the researcher interviewed them and their teachers. The interviews were semi structured and designed to elicit their opinions about the cultural exchange and interactive technology. The interview data was screened, described, and then interpreted thematically.

Findings and discussion
Most students judged the programme successful and experienced it as enjoyable, exciting and motivating. For a considerable number, combining interactive technology and the cultural theme positively affected their views of art education. The majority wanted to visit Canada and mentioned that technology increases cross-cultural interaction. They believed it enabled them to present and communicate Turkish cultural themes effectively also. Overall, 25 per cent commented that the programme had motivated them to learn. The next part of this article presents individual student comments, together with examples of their artwork.

Student responses
Mert was very enthusiastic. He said: ‘The activities were very good. Through seeing, I learned more things. I like learning like this way.’

Mert chose village life as a cultural theme. His drawing represents typical aspects of everyday life in a Turkish village: The rooster on a fence, a horse resting in a barn, a man shepherding sheep, a village woman milking a cow, and a well-used drinking water supply.

Figure 2: Mert (aged 12). Everyday village life.
Ayla also rated the programme very highly saying: ‘I learnt through videos. I learnt better.’

She chose traditional sports as a cultural theme. Her drawing depicts cirit (a traditional competition on horseback using javelins), oil wrestling and archery. These sports remain prominent symbols of Turkish culture today and are highly valued.
Esin and Ege described the lessons as enjoyable, exciting and interesting and noted that the interactivity offered new ways of learning. They said things like:

Esin: ‘Enjoyable [...] Instructions are often boring, but this was fun.’
Ege: ‘Learning by seeing and hearing is better. We could both see and hear.’
Esin: ‘This was an exciting method. I prefer this one.’

Figure 5. Ezgi (aged 12). Traditional houses.

Figure 6: Damla (aged 11). Traditional events.
Esin chose more than one cultural element. Her drawing includes folk dancers wearing traditional clothing and a figure blowing a shrill pipe, which is a traditional musical instrument. It also includes stereotypical cultural symbols (rugs and carpets), together with archery and the national flag that symbolises Turkish independence.

Ezgi chose to paint the village of Safranbolu, located in the province of Karabuk. This village has old houses dating back to the Ottoman era and is
considered historically important. The picture clearly shows this traditional architecture.

Some comments indicated that the programme increased the students’ pride in their own culture. Damla expressed the hope that exchanging cultural information would motivate other children to learn about Turkey. She said: ‘If we introduce our culture to them this way, they will want to come here, to learn about a new culture and to study with us.’

Figure 9: Can (aged 10). Traditional places.

Figure 10: Eda (aged 10). Traditional places.
Her drawing which represents Turkish food, a children’s festival, the national flag and famous historical sites such as the Hagia Sophia museum and Anıtkabir (Ataturk’s tomb), combines several cultural themes. She also drew a dance in which whirling dervishes circle around with one hand pointing to the sky and the other to the ground symbolizing delivering gifts and orders from God to the peoples of the world. The combination of all these cultural elements shows how keen she was to introduce her own culture to children in Canada.

Yavuzhan said he had no previous knowledge of how people in other countries live. He confided ‘This is the first time I have seen what other countries are like, and what people do in other countries.’

He painted another picture of Turkish village life. The aspects he emphasizes are children playing around, farm animals and women, dressed in traditional clothes and scarves, cooking or baking bread. The brick houses are examples of traditional architecture.

Pinar picked up on the theme of village life also. Her drawing depicts a folkdance. Folkdances, wedding ceremonies and other recreational activities are important cultural events in Turkish village life. She placed two other figures playing traditional instruments – a shrill pipe and a drum – beside figures of folk dancers. She wanted the Canadian children to come to Turkey and commented that, ‘Studying with them is fun.’

There was evidence of increased levels of interest not just in learning about other cultures and but in learning in general. Some students stressed the importance of developing awareness of other cultures and using interactive technology to facilitate contact with people from all over the world.

Can: ‘We can make use of technology. We can learn more about them.’

Eda: ‘We can understand them and their culture through using technology and by using Internet.’

Can (aged 10), chose Istanbul – the biggest business metropolis, a bridge between Asia and Europe and a favourite tourist spot – as the cultural theme for his drawing which depicts the Bosporus as a symbol of the city and the Blue Mosque.

He was delighted by this new learning approach and said: ‘I did not know they lived like that. I like it when I learn about children around the world.’

Eda drew a picture of Istanbul that includes the Maiden’s Tower and the Bosporus. She wanted to travel to Canada herself and said: ‘I’d like to go and meet them.’

The Turkish students created wax and oil pastel drawings of Canadian culture as represented in the movies, paintings and photographs exchanged by the Canadian students. Ayca drew a snow scene with decorated Christmas trees and a snowman. When she spoke about the way technology facilitates cross-cultural learning, she said: ‘I understood their thoughts better, because I could really see them.’

Some students who very much appreciated finding out about different cultural viewpoints this way made the following comments:

Yavuzhan: ‘They will also learn through the visuals and wonder about us, which is fun.’
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Ezgi: ‘Finding out about their celebrations and other cultural stuff was good. When the teacher explains it to us, she does not tell us what they really think, but in this programme, we could see what they think, their own opinions.’

The above comments support the claim that interactive technologies facilitate exchanges of cultural information together with art learning. The students participating in this experimental programme used them to view images of daily life, traditional beliefs, feasts and values created during art lessons:

Can: ‘We made use of technology. We learnt more about their culture easily.’

Irmak: ‘Technology is great [...] We can learn everything about them.’

Irmak’s painting (Figure 12) is evidence they learned from each other. Some Canadian students constructed a Dream Catcher from leftover materials...
and explained its significance for aboriginal people who believe it saves children from nightmares and evil souls. Irmak was influenced by this to paint his own picture of a dream catcher. Zeynep who expressed amazement at artworks the Canadian students created, painted another picture of a dream catcher.

Finally, some Turkish students said they wanted to exchange places with the Canadian students because they liked their culture so much:

Zeynep: ‘Their artworks are great. They are doing quite different things.’
Pelin: ‘They do different things, I learnt this. I wish we did the same.’

Here are some examples of paintings of cultural themes and everyday events the Canadian students sent to the Turkish students.

Slater, for example, painted a forest landscape and stated that the word ‘wood’ means Canada for him.

Maia chose the Canadian flag and a beaver as cultural symbols.

Sahara and Galean, on the other hand, chose winter sports. They drew figures skiing down a slope – an everyday winter activity in Canada.

Dylan, chose speed skating on ice as his cultural theme. He also identified Canadian culture with winter sports.

Joseph drew scenes from everyday life that featured hockey, fishing and other cultural activities.

In this study, Canadian and Turkish students interacted during a technology-supported art education programme. They exchanged paintings and drawings representing their cultures. The Turkish students represented traditional cultural symbols, activities and behaviour and historical sites in their art. Their paintings and drawings of villages, traditional sports, meals, and clothing are indicative of how the past continues to stalk the present. They reveal that they understand culture to mean a traditional way of life and customs. The Canadian students’ paintings and video on the other hand focus more on popular culture and current events in everyday life. The Turkish children learned from these differences that people perceive and understand culture differently.
The teachers who supported the students were interviewed also. According to the Canadian teachers, the interactive technology and the video recording and creating images and voice messages grabbed student attention. The students worked hard and were motivated throughout the whole process. The Turkish teachers said the programme aroused student interest in art and technology and positively affected attitudes towards culture and learning. The students enjoyed meeting and learning about another culture and made new friends this way.

**Conclusions**
The interactive art education programme realized within the framework of this study was effective and proved to be an enjoyable learning experience.
The opportunity to collaborate with culturally different peers in this way increased learner self-confidence and the Turkish students’ interest in other cultures increased significantly. They were not biased against the target culture and were keen to participate. They were enthusiastic about the way interactive technologies facilitate exchanges of cultural information with peers.

Increasing cultural awareness through art can have positive effects on student perspectives therefore. The Irish education system promotes interactive learning involving cultural research as a meaningful way of engaging students in emerging technologies (Department of Education and Science, 2000). Cuban (1986) has pointed out that information technologies offer new educational approaches and opportunities and this project discovered that sharing cultural artefacts through artistic endeavour is an effective strategy for encouraging more use of ICT.

The interviews revealed that the majority of the Turkish students experienced the programme as meaningful and responded favourably to the target culture. Interactive teaching of this kind prepares students for life in a global information society. ICT can be used to develop meaningful curricula that increase student awareness of cultural diversity. The programme reported in this paper set out to achieve such goals along with developing a sense of social responsibility and contributing to personal growth and academic achievement in the manner Boughton and Mason have suggested (1999).

The study confirmed that cultural values from the past persist in Turkey. Most of the cultural elements in the Turkish students’ drawings looked backwards into history. It was easy for them to observe and collect this kind of ‘cultural data’. It was more difficult for the Canadian students, who live in a multicultural society and experience a variety of cultural values on an everyday basis to figure out what their cultural identity is.

The teacher evaluations from both countries affirmed the programme increased student motivation, entrepreneurial behaviour, and motivation and enthusiasm for technology, culture and arts. The experiment could be repeated in other educational fields. Interactive education is an effective way of investigating, sharing and learning about culture around the world and this increases the awareness of ICT that is essential for everyone today. The procedures in this study should have been replicated more systematically with the Canadian participants however. Further studies would benefit from using video-conferencing tools so as to realise interactions that go beyond synchronous applications.

Note
The materials on the interactive CD were generated using Adobe Photoshop CS 8.0, Adobe Image Ready CS 8.0, Macromedia Director MX and Pinnacle Studio 9. There were three stages of preparation. The instructional part, called ‘Photographs of Turkish Culture’, included photographs and written materials with cultural themes. ‘Paintings from Turkey’ included children’s pictorial representations of cultural themes. The third part, ‘Message from Turkey’, took the form of video recordings for other students organized to create an asynchronous interaction. The CD was sent to the cooperating school in Canada.
References

Suggested citation

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