Cultural mosaics with mouse clicks: Using the Web to enhance understanding

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Abstract: The World Wide Web offers incomparable opportunities to visualize parallel perspectives underlying world cultures, biases, attitudes, behaviors, and opinions. A simple methodology employed at Coastline Community College improves intercultural understanding as well as adaptation to and appreciation of differences. Teachers and learners can exploit electronic "mind tools" as they engage in "cultural dimensions exams" that have been demonstrated to be effective in enlightening culturally diverse adults studying a foreign language. Exam results stimulate both asynchronous and synchronous discussion, as well as the sharing of ideas in the interest of enhancing awareness, understanding, acceptance, and delight in "the other".

Introduction

Not even a decade into the twenty-first century, human society has found itself inextricably enmeshed in the intercultural. Whether it be arguments about immigration or emigration, citizenship, politics, or artistic expression, people from Africa to the Americas find themselves agreeing that cultural distinctions exist while disagreeing about how to deal with them. And embedded in these notions of distinction recognition is the concept of "otherness", a hierarchical dualism in which we humans tend to divide ourselves into two units, one privileged or favored and the second disfavored or devalued. In short, part of being human has come to mean having an idea of cultural variation, and part of having this notion means that we humans just seem to know who is "in" and who is "out", who is to receive our favors and fraternity versus who is to be considered foreign.

Contrary to most Westerners' acceptance of the idea that differences and distinctions must lie vertically, in a hierarchy, with the familiar "in" being superior to the foreign "out", French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1946) has noted that all of life lies on the same horizontal plane. To Sartre, each human being needs "the other" in order to sustain humanity; rather than "in" and "out", we are each distinctive, harmonious parts of a human whole. Sartre held that our individual freedom lies in our knowing we are each at once creatures distinct from one another and "intersubjective" elements that condition one another's awareness.

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At Coastline Community College, in Fountain Valley, California, students enrolled in a semester-length course in French language and culture online are finding that a foreign, "other" language and its attendant alternative culture might best be examined critically by executing a three-stage analysis. First, in a kind of Sartrian manner, Coastline students are called upon to scrutinize their preconceptions, their prejudices, and their preferences by employing six simple computer-based "mind tools" of the kind presented by Manktelow (2007). Second, these students are asked to take a new perspective, comparing/contrasting their "mind tools" results both asynchronously and synchronously online with those of the multi-cultural participants in the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded *Cultura* project, based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Université de Paris. Finally, after the students have applied "mind tools" across cultures, they perform further self-examination and friendly multimedia-based debate in the context of the five "cultural dimensions" proposed by Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, 2001). This last, constructivist, tri-partite analysis is discussed during semi-weekly electronic live chat sessions and through E-mail. Indeed, Coastline learners online discover through the three-stage process online how to explicate those unspoken aspects of the ethnic that are rooted in the values, beliefs, and expectations that shape human preferences. By employing *mind tools* to describe, define, discuss and debate various *cultural dimensions*, Coastline students learn something more than linguistic and cultural facts; they learn how to participate actively, to integrate electronically, into the mosaic of an increasingly multi-cultural, multi-dimensional, multi-media world.

Mind tool #1: Stories

Manktelow (2007) defines "Stories" as revelations of personal and cultural values; stories expose what people consider to be important, favored, accepted and rejected. As part of their coursework, Coastline online French language students share stories about themselves to disclose basic information. Just as all people do, they make selective disclosures, however, each student revealing his uniqueness, his "condemnation to solitude", as Sartre has put it (1946). But at the same time, these shared stories show how people choose to reveal what, based on what their culture finds significant. For instance, it has been demonstrated that when Americans tell stories about themselves or others, they tend to use their "action-orientated masculine language" (Hall, 1977), citing their achievements, their material success, even their personal lives; professions, prizes, and income often come up. Coastliners learn through participation in shared, interactive francophone Websites such as http://monjournal.actu.tv/ , http://journalintime.com/archives/sites/intimiste/ and http://journalintime.com/ that French speakers everywhere tend more to the "feminine" in self-expression, using logical excurses, references to events in the outside world, and litotes more frequently than do their American counterparts. Coastline learners further read that Hofstede's cultural dimensions for France paint it as a "more feminine and more collectivist" (Hofstede, 2001) society than are any in the Anglophone world; francophones prefer formal formulas for introducing themselves, they do not cite activities or accomplishments as much as do Anglophones, and they are interested in the simple facts of a person's birthplace, educational background and philosophical stance as indications of status.

After they write their first "self-sketch" in French, Coastline onliners are asked to form into a page-long essay, or *exposé,* their answers to a list of web-delivered questions about themselves; they are then invited to compare/contrast these "stories" online to the ones that students in the University of Paris 2-Massachusetts Institute of Technology-based *Cultura* Project have composed. In this last regard, as part of another questionnaire assignment, Coastliners see that, among other things, "stories" relating their most memorable moments, greatest joys, and *plus grandes craintes,* or greatest fears, mesh interestingly with those cited in *Cultura'*s bi-cultural study (cf., http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/classroom/pages/class8.htm). Like the *Cultura* participants on both sides of the Atlantic, Coastliners find that they admire individualism and that they fear personal failure. As Hofstede has noted, France is a "collectivist society" that nevertheless places high value upon individualism. Further, the French tend more than the Americans do to rank world problems high on a socially-oriented agenda. By contrast, Hofstede has found, and Coastliners have confirmed, the United States is an "individualist society" of people who admire the maverick, but only if he achieves his goals in a socially acceptable, "collectivist" manner. Coastliners have discussed the possibility that people in the United States who would study French language and culture online might have self-selected themselves as American-style individualists fascinated by the French-fashioned collective.

Mind tool #2: Rituals and routines

Manktelow examines *Rituals and routines* to discuss the cultural bases underlying people's daily activities; often, these comprise lists rather than autobiographical tales in the way stories do. Manktelow asserts that Americans like to report to one another how busy they are, how each minute is filled with routine activity; Americans enrolled in online courses at Coastline validate Maktelow's claims. That is, they tend in bulletin boards and live chat sessions to cite the number of E-mail messages they receive and how their lives seem to require an almost ritualistic reading of E-mail, listening to telephone messages, responding to communiqués of various kinds. They note that Internet activity and demanding work schedules, along with religious services, leave them little free time; Americans want others to know that each day is full of demands. The French, by contrast, talk of what efforts have been made or attempted in a day, with whom they have shared a meal and what was eaten, as well as family/relationship/international events; religion is not mentioned, since it is usually a more private matter in France than it is in the US.

Rituals and routines reveal what people expect to occur in certain situations, what they consider to be socially acceptable, and what they consider to have value. If people are expected to quit work when the sun sets, if they are expected to take only half an hour or less off work at mid-day for lunch, or if they are expected to leave their doors open or closed might make a difference in certain environments; if the classroom routine is that students rise to greet their instructor or that they await his arrival before they file into a classroom, this will reveal something about them and something about their school environment. What people wear, how they address one another, how they write E-mail

messages or entries in blogs or electronic bulletin boards, how they schedule their lives and participate in discussion, and whether they feel that all coursework must be done *en groupe* or individually---all these things comprise the academic routine, and that routine differs from culture to culture, as Kwintessential, among others, reveals to those who would study culture online: http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/france-country-profile.html .

Immersed in as francophone a world as their instructor has been able to conceive for them under the college aegis, Coastline's French language onliners discover from the first week of their semester-length course that short, simple E-mail messages are not the norm either in their new francophone sector of cyberspace or anywhere else in France, just as pithy essays or entries into online bulletin boards are not the francophone standard. Coastliners are invited to practice francophone-style writing starting from the first day of class, using the Oxford dictionaries' web-based suggestions at http://www.askoxford.com/languages/fr/french_letters/ . As Coastliners learn within the first few days of their heavily-text-based online course, francophone countries admire argumentation, if not verbosity; it has been said that a well-formed argument carries at least as much impact as does a good one in France (Baudry, 2004). Even the youngest French schoolchild, like the most minor French chef, knows that *la présentation* counts for a lot; academic coursework must conform to presentational standards. Moreover, each argument in France generally proceeds in a vermicular fashion; rather than presenting a linear thesis-antithesis-synthesis routine incorporating very little discussion or debate, the French arguer will entertain alternative perspectives, antitheses to antitheses, on his way to a conclusion.

Rituals and routines define how people of various cultures choose to spend their time and plan their days, how they arrange their offices, their files, and their thoughts. Coastline online learners of French share their own rituals and routines with one another and with correspondents in other countries; they read news articles about who defines "sloth" in what words (e.g. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/opinion/25robb.html), and they study European Commission reports to compare their own proclivities with those of their cousins abroad (http://unece.org/gender/publications/Multi-Country/EUROSTAT/HowEuropeansSpendTheirTime.pdf). Upon posting their own remarks at their course electronic bulletin board, they discover what Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince meant when he stated that it was the time that one spends on one's rose that makes that rose so important.

Mind tool #3: Symbols

Just as rituals and routines represent a temporal, physical, and sometimes mental manifestation of a culture's value system, so do "mind tool" *symbols* comprise visual representations of those values. The French are known for stylish dress, for instance, but colors are usually subdued, meant to harmonize. Neatness is important, while the casual is chic in Coastline's southern California. Much recent discussion in the international press has concerned the French government stance that no head scarves symbolizing a

particular ethnicity should be worn in public schools and no religious icons should be allowed to dangle from the wrists or neck. Americans, by contrast, sport religious jewelry and clothing as group-membership icons; even tattoos are sometimes meant to show off one's faith.

As Marcus and Gould (2001) have demonstrated, the symbols, rituals, and routines that a particular culture accepts as standard or "in" or "okay", as well as those that the culture rejects as non-standard or unacceptable or "out", are at least as apparent online as they are on the street or in the press. That is, for example, if a culture considers routine and ritual to be important, if it places high value on symbols such as certificates, diplomas, medals, and the like, then its Websites will tend to be symmetrical, they will focus upon the institutional seal, and they will depict monumental buildings; the sites will constitute evidence of the society's strong "power distance", in Hofstede's terms. If people are exhibited at all on such a culture's institutional websites, they will be depicted in cap and gown receiving diplomas. If, by contrast, the culture considers ideas and interaction, argumentation and political involvement to be important, then its sites will be more asymmetrical, it will incorporate photos of ordinary people rather than of symbolic things, its colors will be more harmonious, its utility interactive.

Just as "power distance"-oriented French institutional websites feature sculptures, statues, symbolic remnants of the glorious past, so do most modern French people tend to prefer substantial furnishings fabricated to last; their structures are also meant to survive generations of use. This contrasts with Californians' common practice of buying a home with an eye on its resale value. California furniture, gardens, and homes are easily razed and replaced; Californians have little need for a "power distance" ranking. French advertising, whether for real estate, food, books, or political candidates, often includes prints and quotes from famous designers or artists, usually using artistically arrayed colors from similar parts of the spectrum, while American ads cite slogans, deals, low prices, and urgency in red. Coastline onliners have found that French institutional websites tend in some respects to be "monumental" in Marcus's sense, with eighteenth-century façades and nineteenth-century art covering many pages, but they are also asymmetrically artistic, harmonious, inviting, interacting with the user, asking him to surf through them in a typically French multi-tiered, vermicular manner, symbolizing the francophone reasoning process; even the Franco-American *Cultura* project site radiates a non-linear air. Indeed, French Web design, or "infographics", is considered a fine art. This all contrasts with the Coastline College sites that have been set up for students, all of which resemble one another in an institutional effort to exhibit a "signature", a degree of consistency. Although American society is generally not much interested in high "power distance" in the Hofstede sense, Coastline course sites display a lot of it, denying full access to the unenrolled, demanding a lock-step progression, and not entertaining "outside" surfing. Coastline cites security measures, safe-surfing control, an interest in individual privacy.

Mind tool #4: Organizational structure

Cultural symbols tend to communicate both implicitly and explicitly what Manktelow cites as mind tool #4, *organizational structure*. Manktelow holds that this structure reveals the seen and unseen lines of power and influence in a social group or culture. Most francophone countries, France included, are not only "collectivist", as Hofstede has called them, but highly unionized; although francophone society is hierarchical, however, each level of the hierarchy feels the need and the power to express its wants as needs. Typical of the French group need for self-expression was the series of transportation strikes of late October, 2007; the recently elected President Nicholas Sarkozy went into the streets of Paris among the strikers, sometimes touching them, always arguing with them, listening to each person's grievance and responding individually. By contrast with France, the United States likes to consider itself democratic, classless, without either a suffering *Lumpenproletariat* or a privileged few; the American President tends to present himself in public, usually behind a podium, almost always with prepared statements. As the *Cultura* project participants have noted, Americans tend fundamentally to fear change, to be suspicious of the individualist whom they claim to admire, and to look to others to define their success. The aforementioned *Cultura* question concerning *les plus grandes craintes* revealed that Americans fear failure, financial disaster, and death far more than do francophones, who fear natural disaster and war more than Americans do.

French hierarchy-rich, collectivist organizational structure appears Byzantine to most Americans (cf. one of the readings offered to Coastline online learners of French language: http://www.communicaid.com/%5Ccross-cultural-training%5Culture-for-business-and-management%5Cdoing-business-in%5CFrench_business_culture.php) ; bureaucracy is definitely a French invention. French schools, offices, businesses, and government all display dizzying levels of pseudo-officialdom. By contrast, American society seems to the French to harbor implicit xenophobia and bellicosity along with materialism and an admiration of Hollywood bling. Tables of organization in American institutions seem to the French to sport lots of not-quite-upper management; finding a single *grand directeur* appears to the French to be an impossible task in an American organization. Alternatively, French people know who is in the upper management, even though everyone who has attained that status keeps his distance from lesser *fonctionnaires* when he can.

Mind tool #5: Control systems

Control systems encompass the patterns of reward and punishment, of benefits, of quality; these things are said to *control* how we think and behave; they differ from culture to culture. As the Paris-Boston participants in the *Cultura* project have made it plain, French people's values, what the French define as most important in life, underlie that certain *je ne sais quoi* defining a "high-quality life." That is, for instance, because being in good health and retaining good, strong family ties have been cited as the most important aspects of existence to the French people participating in the *Cultura* project (http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/classroom/pages/q3.htm), a "high-quality life"

for the French should ensure long-term wellbeing and proximity to family. By contrast, American participants in the same project have claimed professional success and a good income/financial reward to be of maximal qualitative value. Americans seem to the French to equate reward with money; to the French mind, status counts for at least as much as do finances. Moreover, Americans place high value on being able to control their professional lives and their income; Americans tend to have more credit cards, personal automobiles, and personal computers than do francophones. Americans are invested far more heavily in stocks and in 401k-style arrangements than are the French, too; the latter expect that *L'Etat*, the federal government, will take charge of those details.

Definitions of "quality" differ not only culture by culture but also within cultures. The American liberal globalist might, for instance, consider imports from other cultures to be delightful gifts, as Marcus and Gould (2001) note; these same items might be classed by others as poisons to the public good. The partisan of the American melting-pot might prefer that newcomers *assimilate* rather than *integrate*, that they abandon their cultural identity in favor of a new one instead of preserving a language, behavior, diet, and holiday schedule imported from their countries of origin (Dasen, 2007). The benefits of American society are considered to be inherently superior to any qualities that an immigrant's culture might offer. To the French mind, especially in recent years, the notion of a "melting-pot" is suspect, risking transformation into the reality of the "pressure cooker", in which assimilation is imposed by the greater/outside society upon the minority-group newcomers. French computer users complain frequently of a forced assimilation by members of non-American cultures into what they see as an Americanocentric technocracy; the default language and style, format and code are all American.

High-quality success in the United States is usually attained through competition. He who succeeds in the US is commonly afforded a financial reward: a raise, a promotion with a raise, a monetary bonus, or a stock option. A typical French reward, earned by means mysterious to the non-francophone, will comprise time off, an opportunity to take a course or to do special research paid for by one's employer. In Hofstede's terms, the American success story is a "masculine" one, arrived at by a demonstration of strength or activity, vigor and vitality. To the French, success is defined more by achievement than it is by triumph; Hofstede calls this a "feminine" feature of the society.

Americans pride themselves on having a strong "work ethic", on taking only two weeks off work per year, by contrast with the French four or five. But ironically enough, Americans enjoy going out at night, partying, even getting drunk, far more than do French people, as the *Cultura* participants have revealed. Furthermore, when francophones plan a trip somewhere for vacation, they may read about the place where they are to go, the languages people speak, the foods they eat, the festivals to be celebrated, and the modes of transportation available in small towns; French tourists prefer to drive or to take a train or fly rather than to take long tours or ocean cruises; they usually plan their own trips. By contrast, the American cruise and tourism industries offer travel agents or tour guides to do everything; a tour overview is planned by an outside

expert. Hofstede has classed the French as having more "feminine" values in this regard, too, preferring the intimate, the less organized time off; Americans tend toward the assertive "masculine" side, says Hofstede, liking to keep their time filled up with excursions, activities, fun. Americans "take" vacations, "spend" time, "have fun." By contrast, francophones "make" vacations, "pass" time, "amuse themselves."

Mind tool #6: Power structures

While organizational structure and control systems are somewhat explicit manifestations of a culture's composition of power management, Manktelow's mind tool #6 shows *power structures* to be more implicit, understood, unspoken; these comprise the "pockets of real power". Although France is bursting with petty bureaucrats, with political parties representing more than a dozen philosophies, and with more than 300 types of cheese, each with its own farm co-operative fighting for a voice in France's future, French power is famously invested in an explicit hierarchy; as has been noted, Hofstede has cited the French as accepting significant "power distance." French citizens are invited to influence decisions made within the hierarchy by participating in political life of the collectivist society; the French enjoy the political disputes generated by more than a dozen political parties. By contrast, American political parties demonstrate very little difference, to the French mind. Too, while American businesses' organizational structures may appear at first glance to be transparent, they very often hide "the good old boys" networks that hold real sway.

As Marcus and Gould (2001) have noted, power structures are apparent online in Website design and utility. Many American institutions, Coastline College included, depend upon a course management system and/or a learning management system bearing the institutional imprint. These systems tend to come with a fixed template that is to be applied to all courses, whether they be scientific, technical, humanistic or linguistic. Because Web design is considered to be a fine art in France, French college courses often express the personality or the *mentalité* of an instructor, a department, or a school within a university. Thus, although the French social order is more collectivist, more hierarchy-oriented, and more power-driven than is American society, it is the Americans who cling to control over students' Web-surfing habits.

Integrating and explicating: Mind tools and cultural dimensions

French language and culture onliners at Coastline Community College use Mantelow's six mind tools to compare/contrast their own, or their native group culture, as it relates to those of the francophone target groups, testing their intercultural literacy along the way by bouncing their ideas against *Cultura* Project reports and discussing them live online. Coastline students are then invited to examine their analyses more deeply, to discern how they mesh with the five cultural dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede in his international survey of business and social practices, most recently updated in 2007. That is, for example, after they notice that the French tend to accept that certain people belong

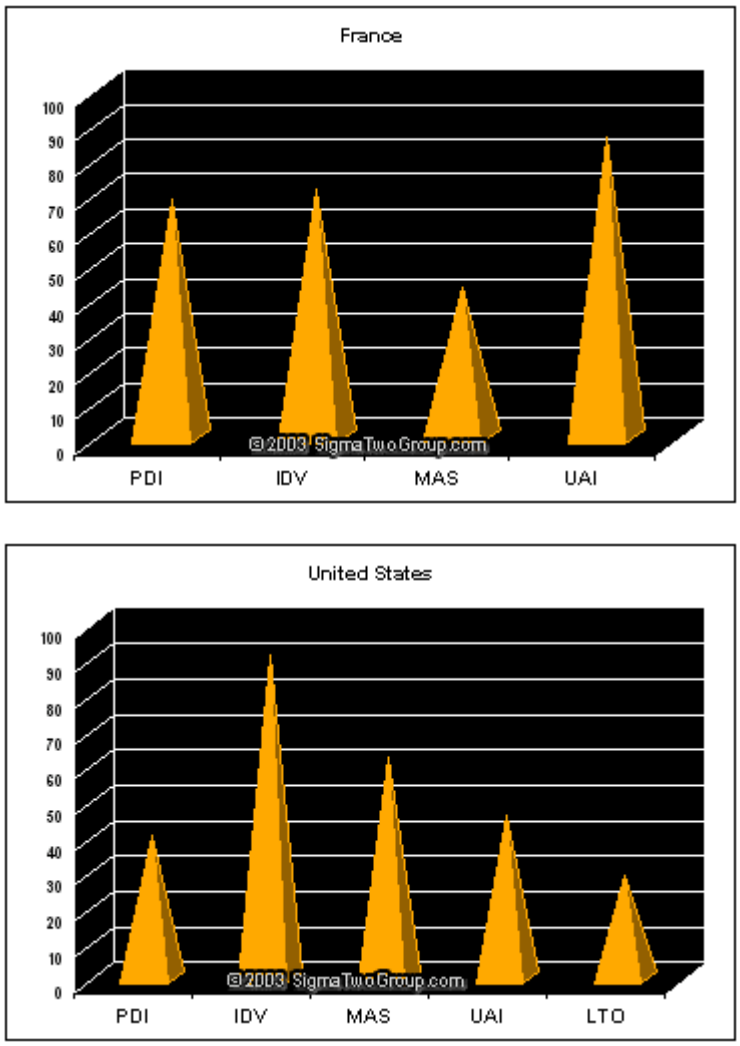
to a higher status than do certain others, with mind-tool-style "power structure" fixed from generation to generation, Coastline students are better able to discuss Hofstede's "Power Distance Index" (PDI), which rates France as more strongly power-driven than any other European country; the United States lies some twenty points away from France in the PDI. Why and how *Cultura* Project participants have arrived at their determinations and the rubric underlying Hofstede's evaluations are explored in detail online.

After reading and discussing Hofstede's work as it explicates in graphs the sort of information Manktelow presents in prose, students return to the *Cultura* Project for an intercultural self-examination to discern the impact of the rankings with others, marshaling Web-sourced data to support their opinions.

By contrast with the "Power Distance" classification, Coastline students see that Hofstede's "Individualism Index"(IDV) rates the United States ranks far and away above more than a hundred other countries; the US therefore "attributes value to and expresses an interest in personal appropriation of freedom" more than do the other countries surveyed. Collectivist France, which counts group membership, union activism, and political group strength as important, ranks twenty points below the US on Hofstede's individualism scale. Further, Coastline students find, Hofstede's "Masculinity Index" (MAS) places the United States near the top, where countries interested in assertiveness, physical/material strength, and competitiveness lie; France ranks among the more "feminine" countries, valuing group achievement, personal modesty, the artistic, and caring for others' points of view. As has been stated above, France is high on the "Uncertainty avoidance" (UAI) index, however, with rules, laws, and bureaucracy playing an enormous role in every aspect of existence; the French have myriad forms to fill out, documents to submit, legal hoops through which to jump at every turn. Americans are far lower on this index; Americans accept much uncertainty in their lives and are less likely than are francophones to submit to outside law. France is, finally, a more long-term oriented (LTO) society than is the Usa, concerned about retaining social status, historical values, and the ideal of the persistent worker, while Americans admire the upwardly mobile worker and prefer the present to the past or the future.

France's significant "power distance" rating indicates that people with less power in the country expect and accept an unequal distribution of power. The lower "power distance" rating of the United States should mean that Americans enjoy broad access to information, transparency, and what Hofstede calls a "shallow hierarchy" (2007); Americans are predicted through these data to tolerate uncertainty and to accept outsiders. But as Marcus and Gould (2001) have noted and *Cultura* Project participants have verified, American institutions, media, and attendant Websites appear impenetrable; safety, security, and privacy regulations/controls have constructed impassable barricades impossible for non-Americans to scale. By contrast, even though France has what Hofstede calls a "deep hierarchy", French people value respect, tolerance, and honesty (cf.: http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/classroom/pages/q6.htm) far more than do Americans, who rank success and independence more highly than do the French. Coastline students discuss their own opinions and those of *Cultura* Project participants in

the context of "cultural dimensions" generalizations summarized graphically for France and the United States; following their analysis of these Hofstede-based graphs, Coastliners are asked to use MSOffice or http://www.analyzemath.com –style systems to graph their own cultural dimensions, which they share at their course Website:



A decade after French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin called for tangible results of French technological enthusiasm, expertise, and intelligence to be made plain in schools and in businesses everywhere (Chenaille, 2001), the country is excited to admit outsiders into its sector of cyberspace. French educational institutions open their libraries, and *médiathèques* offer multiple media platforms to anyone. As Hall (1977) has called it, French society is not so much either "long-term oriented" or "short-term oriented" in its sense of the importance of time; Coastliners analyze these orientations and their own attitudes thereabouts online at http://www.clearlycultural.com/ , using the critical thinking mind tools they have exploited during their course to apply cognitive, structural techniques to their own minds.

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Online study of French language and culture has led students at Coastline Community College to have transcended time and place in the very way francophone language and culture express what Hall has called a novel sort of *polychrony.* That is, francophones tend to see the present through the lens of the past and with a perspective for the future; neither time nor actions are compartmentalized. By contrast, Americans are generally a more monochronic lot, able to study historical epochs one by one, able to analyze subjects part by part, and able to compartmentalize their Websites so that users may gain access to certain areas but not to others. At Coastline Community College, in Fountain Valley, California, online students of French language and culture have begun to see with the use of six mind tools how to place learning in a timeless dimension where linguistic awareness and cultural literacy will offer them a mosaic of knowledge in a new world context.

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