

Sharing Culture Shock through a Collection of Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Culture shock and cultural adaptation are phenomena that international students experience, while crossing boundaries. On their arrival to the U.S., displaced students from the Third World often feel isolated, afraid, inferior, and insecure. Digital collections can serve as a medium for sharing sensations and experiences. They can help overcome the sense of isolation and culture shock, by illustrating to an individual how others have similar experiences. We are building a digital collection to support this exchange of experiences. In collecting experiences, we found that first person ethnographic interviews are more effective as a method for data collection, when they are conducted with a sense of informality. *Woezor*, a prototype system, was developed to structure and present these collections, using the Greenstone digital libraries software.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.3.7 [Information Storage and Retrieval]: Digital Libraries – collection, user issues. **General terms:** design.

1. CULTURE SHOCK

Many students travel from underdeveloped countries to study in America. Moving to a foreign culture is an experience that is often looked forward to with excitement and enthusiasm. However, international students often discover, once they have moved to the U.S., that they are unprepared for the extent of cultural dissimilarity encountered. A frequent result is the severe sensation of psychological disorientation. This is called *culture shock* [2]. Crossing cultural boundaries requires getting used to a new way of doing things. Becoming accustomed to new ways of life is *cultural adaptation* [2].

On their arrival to the U.S., displaced students from the Third World often feel isolated, afraid, inferior, and insecure. This comes partly from being new in a foreign land, and being a member of a minority race. These students are confronted by differences in financial security, and prevailing economic standards. This can feel intimidating. The foreign students experience differences in educational structures. Confusion about these differences may interfere with their process of adjustment to the new system. The students from other countries do not understand what their position will be. The new environment of culture, material goods, and bureaucratic structures is immersive. The experience of difference is pervasive. The displaced individual is prone to feeling isolated. All of this affects self-esteem. It affects psychological well-being, which in turn, can effect academic performance.

2. SHARING CULTURE SHOCK

We believe that sharing the experience of culture shock will help people in the process of cultural adaptation. We see digital

collections as a medium that can support the exchange of experiences of home, and how the foreign country differs. Sharing these experiences can create new webs of cultural connection, and build confidence and a sense of belonging. Learning about others' experiences with similar psychological factors, like feeling inferior and insecure, can replace those sensations with a sense of community.

Another motivation is to bridge the diverse cultures that are displaced, and to promote interaction between them. The digital collection has the potential to create a space in which displaced people relate directly to each other, instead of only through the reference environment of the U.S. People can learn and understand the diverse nature of cultures. This can create tolerance and connection between cultures.



Shopping in Lagos, Nigeria, and College Station, U.S.

3. COLLECTION OF EXPERIENCES

We call our digital collection, *Woezor*. Among the *Ewe* people of Southeastern Ghana, this special greeting is offered with enthusiasm by a host when a guest comes to visit. “*Woezor*” can best be translated as, “You are welcome! My house is your house.” We utilized the Greenstone digital libraries infrastructure [1] to build a prototype.

The collection is intended to serve international students. Before they come to the U.S., prospective students can learn about the experiences of others. This can help them to make decisions, and prepare. We also envision teachers and students across the world accessing this system, as a resource for learning about diverse cultural perspectives.

Woezor is a structured collection of stories. We gathered an initial set of stories through first person, informal ethnographic interviews. These are stories about common categories of experiences, such as shopping for food, transportation, eating habits, and discrimination. The details of experience vary substantially within these common categories. For example, the environments of shopping, the goods available, and the social relationships among buyers and sellers vary across contexts.

4. REFERENCES

- [1] New Zealand Digital Library Project, Greenstone Digital Library Software, <http://www.greenstone.org>
- [2] Winkelman, M., Culture shock and adaptation. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 73, 121-126, 1994.