



## Email in a 'thirdspace': enhancing intercultural communication

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**Abstract:** *Intercultural communication has traditionally focussed on knowing other cultures and finding ways to bring about more harmonious interaction but it can also be considered as taking place in a dimension where participants make use of their different cultural positions to negotiate better understandings that reduce any power differentials that might exist between them. This idea raises the possibility that, rather than an us/them binary which tends to position one side of the binary as dominant and the other deficient in some way there is a 'thirdspace' (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996) that can allow for deeper understandings between those who are in positions of power and those who may be marginalised. It has been suggested that email has the potential to include previously marginalised groups and close the gap between staff and students in educational settings (Thomas 2003; Cope & Kalantzis 2000). This paper is an initial exploration of how a study of email interactions between academics and international research students might lead to better understandings of what is happening in intercultural communication and offer insights into how it could be enhanced. In an environment where one of the challenges for Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers is to look for ways to enhance intercultural communication in the university, the notion of 'thirdspace' provides an important source for exploration and reflection.*

**Key words:** *Intercultural communication, electronic communication, lecturer-student relationships*

## **Introduction**

Communication in the context of higher education is often of an intercultural nature and this is due in part to the fact that international students make up a significant proportion of the student body. Much of this communication takes place via email with little attention given to the cultural expectations and levels of linguistic competence that users may have. Email has rapidly established itself as a major aspect of everyday life in universities. It has become accepted as a neutral medium and its limitations glossed over as irritations rather than analysed in order to improve communication. This tendency to 'take it for granted' can lead to an underestimation of the effect that misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication might have on relationships between academic staff and international students. Although the use of email is rarely a new experience for the international student, unfamiliarity with linguistic and cultural practices has the potential to leave students feeling alienated and less confident about taking their place in the academic community.

LAS advisers have a pivotal role in improving communication between academic staff and international students. They are well placed to help bring about more effective communication as their work includes mediating between academic staff and students and interpreting the discourses and practices of the academy (Melles, 2001). As a diverse group traditionally marginalised in universities where content is privileged over skills, LAS advisers are beginning to take a more strategically productive position (Percy & Stirling, 2003, p. 59). This unique position enables them to act as instigators of change engaging in discussions with academic staff, unpacking cultural differences and assisting in bringing about improvements in learning and teaching for different groups of staff and students.

A staff-student relationship for which LAS involvement in intercultural communication is particularly relevant is that between supervisors and international research students. This relationship relies on intensive negotiation and collaboration over time and its development can be relegated to a minor position as participants focus on the

task of completing research and producing a thesis. Yet neither party is necessarily prepared for the process of intercultural communication required. Supervisors, who are likely to be untrained in intercultural awareness, may be influenced by discourses that position international students as deficient (Bullen & Kenway, 2003). International students may lack confidence in language use and be unsure of what to expect in the relationship. Miscommunication can result from assumptions that are thought to be shared but are not and misunderstandings of politeness strategies that are culturally determined (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Misunderstandings like these can lead to altered perceptions about the skills and abilities of the international research student (Cargill, 2000). For many international research students the supervisor is the only contact with the academic community and this isolation is exacerbated by the requirement that they adjust to what may be an unfamiliar academic and cultural context (Knight, 1999). In addition to these potential areas of difficulty in the relationship, an added dimension is introduced when some or all student-supervisor interactions take place through email.

An understanding of intercultural communication from the perspective of a 'thirdspace' (Soja, 1996) can lead to more conscious and careful interaction in the spaces between different cultural positions, resulting in more satisfactory email relationships between academic staff and international research degree students. In order to look at how this intercultural relationship could be strengthened it is first necessary to explore the notion of 'thirdspace' and its role in enhancing intercultural understandings before discussing email in the university setting and its potential for assisting or inhibiting relationships between academic staff and international research students. Some reflections are also provided on the role of LAS advisers in enhancing these intercultural interactions.

### **Intercultural communication**

Much of the research in intercultural communication has focussed on establishing and finding ways to mitigate cultural differences and is based on the belief that improving knowledge about a culture can bring about harmonious interaction. Cultural knowledge is an element of successful intercultural communication but when it promotes a focus on difference, implying the strengthening of boundaries between cultures, it can create an us/them binary which tends to position one side or category

as dominant and the other deficient simply because it is different. The us/them binary puts in place boundaries that leave no space in between, no potential for a 'we' in which working with cultural difference can produce new and creative meanings. When cultural interaction is perceived in terms of a binary there is the potential for stereotyping and ethnocentrism. Opening up the binary and perceiving intercultural relations as taking place in a space that recognises and respects the boundary positions seems to be an approach that is more equitable and empowering for all.

### **Space and identity**

Once thought of as neutral and unrelated to the social world, 'space' has come to be conceived of as a complex and contradictory notion (Usher, 2002). However, it is one that is useful for extending our understanding of social relations. One of the first to recognise the renewed importance of space was Lefebvre who developed a 'trialectic' of space which included, the perceived or 'real' space, the conceived or 'imagined' space and the lived space, a combination of both the 'real' and the 'imagined' (Soja, 1996, p. 10). This multidimensional perception of space focuses on the process of the production of space rather than space itself (Shields, 1999, p. 167). These considerations of the complex relationships of spatial perception opened up different ways of thinking about space particularly in terms of social relations. Conceiving of the production of space as involving a 'breaking down' of boundaries between different cultural positions allows for attitudes and thinking that work productively with binaries. Because it is able to transcend binary categories, space has the potential to 'draw selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives' (Soja, 1996, p.5). Thus categories that are very different can work together to generate new knowledges and understandings in a 'thirdspace'. Thus 'thirdspace' acts as a scaffold, a way of seeing connections and empowering the inhabitants of social spaces. It is not a static or fixed space but one which is continually open to challenge and change.

A related understanding of this 'thirdspace' is as a 'contact zone', a social space where cultures meet and make contact with each other in asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination (Pratt, 1992, p.4). A hybrid space is produced that resists essentialised stereotypes which suppress difference and mask power

hierarchies (Bhabha, 1994). This hybrid space is also a site of struggle as subjects attempt to develop a strong sense of self while responding to an 'other'. The 'other' is not outside or beyond the participants but emerges within the intercultural interaction. (Bhabha, 1990, p.4) It is in this struggle for identity that 'newness enters the world' and the productive nature of the third space is realised (Bhabha, 1994, p.212). It is in this hybrid, dynamic space that communication between academic staff and international research students can be positioned. Both the academic and the international research student are 'othered' to a degree as each attempts to create new understandings. Rather than stereotyping and making assumptions about how the 'other' should act, the 'thirdspace' allows each to search for an understanding of the world of the 'other'. This process frees the mind to explore new possibilities for relating that rely on mutuality and reciprocity.

### **Virtual space**

Much has been made of the enabling aspects of the electronic world where virtual connections between people can function to produce community in the same way as a real world community exists (Rheingold, 2000). The virtual environment has the potential to function as 'town square', a place where the voice of the underrepresented can be heard more frequently (Ma, 2000). Research in education has also been influenced by the spatial theories of Lefebvre and Bhabha showing the virtual to be a cultural space where the knowledges of students from different cultures can be shared in a separate 'thinking space' beyond the usual learning environment (Williamson & DeSouza, 2002; Moje et al., 2004). The positive nature of the virtual space is also understood to enhance the learning experience by helping to engage students, by opening up an affective channel thus providing a new dimension not found in face-to-face communication (Sunderland, 2002). It may allow students and academics more freedom to construct a range of possible selves that actually enhance their roles as student and teacher (Moran & Hawisher, 1997, p.92). New versions of the self can be developed and participants can share their thoughts 'without being distracted by other social cues' (Ma, 2000, p.97). Thus technological or virtual space can be characterised as a space where there are 'a multiplicity of possibilities and potentialities' rather than as an empty space (Usher, 2002, p.51). Because of the lack of audio and visual cues available to communicators, virtual

space is seen more as neutral territory that allows additional identity positions to be explored.

In discussions of the virtual world as a site of community and in some education research there has been a tendency to emphasise the positive aspects of virtual communication but recent studies are less enthusiastic about the potential offered by virtual space. They claim, for instance, that the absence of extra-linguistic cues, rather than being neutral territory, leave the potential for communication breakdown and alienation from meaningful interaction (Mann, 2005). In addition, the equality suggested by the online community is not necessarily present in educational institutions where disparate power relations often exist (Hodgson & Reynolds, cited in Mann, 2005). A more useful model for intercultural interactions involves the notion of dialogue and discussion about the differences and inequalities within the learning environment (Mann, 2005). This model can be likened to the approach that might be taken by those interacting using a 'thirdspace' understanding. Virtual spaces then, have the potential to allow the boundaries between those with power and those in a marginalised position to be negotiated and differences appreciated, but are by no means automatically bestowed with this quality. It is how the virtual space is used by participants in interaction that will decide if a virtual space is also a 'thirdspace' interculturally.

### **Email in the university setting**

Email has become just one of several different forms of virtual communication assisting the business of learning and teaching in the University and as such, tends to be taken for granted. However, while the email mode seems neutral, it does, like any technology, affect the process of communication. Perhaps most obvious of these is how to manage increased volumes of mail as it comes to be used by more people (Hawisher & Moran, 1993; Thomas, 2003). For some, email has been recognised as an invasive technology that produces additional invisible work for academics (Hawisher & Moran, 1993). Students too can easily be overwhelmed by the volume of mail they are required to read that is generated by their classmates or lecturers. Issues of email overload are important because they can lead to users becoming dissatisfied with the medium and abandoning it or not using it to its best advantage.

It is in the area of language learning that much research into email use has taken place. While not all international research students are language learners or non-native speakers, a discussion of their email use has many parallels with this research because of the relationship between language and culture. An intercultural relationship is often also one where at least one participant is a non-native user of the language involved. Non-native speakers are considered to have a preference for email use because it is perceived to be a less confronting channel than spoken interaction (Bloch, 2002). By writing the message the non-native speaker can avoid the embarrassment of mistakes or misunderstandings. Because there is time to craft the message and correct mistakes before sending, it is a 'safer' channel. However this advantage can also be a disadvantage for the non-native speaker as the absence of extra-linguistic cues such as facial expression and feedback in the interaction can amplify misunderstandings and lead to communication breakdown. Non-native speakers may be unaware of instances of communication breakdown or lack strategies to deal with breakdowns when they do occur (Stockwell, 2004). They may be unable to interpret the extra-linguistic aspects of the communication such as management of 'chronemics' or the length of the pause between email messages (Wood & Smith, 2001, p.37).

Despite these difficulties that non-native speakers may have with email there is enthusiastic support for the use of email to assist in the task of language learning. Email use may have value in providing an additional opportunity to practice written forms. Thorne (2003) found that language learners in a peer collaboration context showed development in language proficiency simply because of the extra opportunity to use the language. However, more practice does not alone guarantee success in developing writing skills. There is a need to understand and produce an appropriate style for each writing context. While informal emails are like a personal letter, they also have more formal purposes particularly in the academic context. Email is often thought of as speech written down or as a hybrid linguistic form and thus it requires online written conventions that do not apply in other writing contexts (Moran & Hawisher, 1997). These conventions are not always clearly defined for non-native speakers. While Warschauer (1999) suggests writing email messages as an example of an authentic writing task and Swales and Feak (2004) include email communication in their academic writing text, there is little general acknowledgement

of the different genres of email and how they should be used. This is some justification for using email in language development activities as it requires that the writer decide from the range of linguistic choices available which is suitable for the particular situation (Crystal 2001 cited in Bloch 2002). This research points to some of the issues where intercultural communication in the academic context is by email and has relevance for international research students who are learning academic culture and often language as well.

### **The role of email in relationship development**

Email does not have an automatic association with the development of relationships and is most likely to be of value in strengthening one that already exists. For a relationship to grow suggests that dialogue is developed and many exchanges take place over time. This is not the expectation in the majority of email communications between academic staff and international students. Rarely is there an expectation that a relationship will develop. In many email exchanges the focus is on information and there may be only one or two exchanges on a topic. Research on email has tended to focus more on the purpose of email messages such as whether they were for requesting, negotiating or reporting. (Lee, 2004; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). Friedman and Currall refer to the isolation of the sender and describe much email as 'profoundly anti social' (2003, p.7) claiming that it can escalate disputes in a way that would not happen in face-to-face interaction. These studies can be useful in terms of describing for what purposes email is best employed but they do not offer much in the way of understanding how relationships develop.

In other studies there is a focus on the informal interaction that is possible in email and how it can help develop relationships (Swales & Feak, 2004; Bloch, 2002). This implies improved educational outcomes, as students are able to build relationships with academic staff. The potential for a more personal communication style can serve to challenge the hierarchical relationship between academic staff and students (Moran & Hawisher 1997). Much of the research in this area involves researchers examining their own email interactions with students and is concerned with the impact of email communication on the roles of student and academic (Thomas, 2003; Sunderland, 2002; Bloch, 2002). There is an attempt to show how the email exchange has provided an additional space that adds an affective dimension to the

relationship. One reason that this social, non-hierarchical aspect is possible is because the medium allows direct access to individuals without requiring a 'gatekeeper', as would have happened in the past (Ma, 2000, p.96).

How can this knowledge of email and its potential to affect relationships influence interactions between academic staff and international research students? In the research degree context a hierarchical relationship is taken for granted and has been likened to a 'familial model' which places the supervisor as parent and the candidate as child (Bartlett & Mercer 2000). However, there is an emerging understanding of the relationship as being just one in the student's research network and thus much more than 'an isolated dyadic relationship' (Green, 2005, p.153). Nevertheless the unique features of the relationship mean that it lends itself to an electronic dimension which could assist in reducing the effect of its hierarchical nature. The association is generally sustained, lasting from two to four years which allows time for a relationship to develop. The relationship usually also includes a face-to-face dimension which can function to moderate some of the negative aspects of electronic communication. If there is a commitment to building a successful intercultural relationship, one that builds on the strengths of each participant, one where there is 'shared understanding and mutual respect' (Sandeman-Gay, 1999, p.41), then this would seem to be a suitable location for an investigation of the potential for interaction in the 'thirdspace'.

### **Email analysis**

If 'thirdspace' can be a useful concept in understanding intercultural communication what can it offer to an examination of email texts? An examination of the texts created by academics and international research students can indicate what is happening in intercultural communication. Studies of how users have adapted to the medium (Sunderland, 2002); or the topics they choose (Bloch, 2002) provide some insight into the development of relationships especially in the role of social and informal language but this can be extended by using a more detailed discourse analysis of texts. The analysis can indicate if participants are attempting to break down the boundaries between their different cultural positions or reinforcing power differentials that exist in the relationship such as instances of academic staff speaking as 'us', as 'legitimate knower instructing the cultural 'other' (Doherty, 2004, p.9). The analysis can search for any attempts to subvert these disparate power

relations and explore the potential provided, both by the virtual space and by 'thirdspace', to enhance email communication.

The results of an investigation of what is taking place through email interactions and the potential for elements of 'thirdspace' interaction can inform a more inclusive climate for interactions between supervisors and international research students. The process can be assisted by LAS advisers in their unique position on the margins of the disciplines. They can be instigators of research into intercultural email interaction and as language specialists and academic skills experts they are ideally placed to apply their knowledge to a close textual analysis. The results of such research could point to practical strategies for email users that would assist them to communicate beyond the binary model that imposes an us/them dichotomy and thus to enhance intercultural communication in the university.

## Conclusion

The notion of 'thirdspace' can be used to inform an investigation of email interactions between academic staff and international research students. By understanding how binary thinking strengthens boundaries between participants and has the potential to marginalise, those engaging in intercultural communication in the university can enhance their communication via email. The role of LAS advisers, as supplemental to the relationship between academic staff and the international research students they supervise, can be to initiate changes and mediate between staff and students so that improved email communication can assist intercultural relationships and benefit learning and teaching in the university.

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