How to Build a Digital "Patchwork Quilt" to Create Community

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The Asian Studies Virtual Friendship Quilt Project at East Carolina University

Background and goals

In 2006 the International Studies Program and the Department of History in the Harriot College of Arts and Sciences at East Carolina University received a two-year $158,000 grant from the US Department of Education under its Undergraduate International Education and Foreign Language Program to develop and expand ECU's Asian Studies Program, co-directed by Henning and Dr. John Tucker, Professor of Asian History and Director of the Asian Studies Minor. A goal of the program is to create a multidisciplinary Asian Studies Program to explore from a variety of disciplinary perspectives the cultures and contributions of Asia, increasing our students' and faculty members' understanding of this important area of the world as it emerges as a dynamic and significant force in the changing economic and social worlds of the 21st-century "global economy."

The grant will support three types of activities: 1) curriculum enhancement through courses in Japanese and Chinese, the expansion of Asian content courses or courses with Asian Studies units across many disciplines to expand the Asian Studies minor, and the creation of an Asian Studies major; 2) funding for faculty travel grants to allow two-week curriculum development trips to Asia for the development of new Asian Studies content courses or modules; and 3) co-curricular and community outreach activities such as an Asian film series, an Asian Studies Forum featuring ECU faculty and Fulbright Scholars, a digital image database for instructional use, workshops for Pitt County K-12 teachers, and an Asian Studies web site.

In order to create a web site to promote the Asian Studies Program, we needed to choose a visual motif. This was made more difficult by the fact that the web site had to be created within ECU's recently-adopted web-based web site management program, CommonSpot, and that ECU had established a campus wide "look" and format for all

ECU web pages. The prescribed format for images was unusual, 770 pixels wide and 160 pixels high, an awkward size for many photographs, which meant we needed to make our own.

We made an early decision that the most appropriate visual representation for the various countries of Asia would be images of textiles, which could be adapted easily to the required format. Textiles are universal, but vary infinitely from culture to culture. Textiles are both visual and tactile. Since they are the material of clothing, protection and comfort, and are closely associated with the domestic sphere of "home" and "family." They often serve to link people to one another and have very personal emotional or metaphoric meaning for individuals. At the same time, textiles can be used to distinguish one group of people from another, either on a local level where women from one village wear clothing of a different pattern than women from a neighboring village or one Scottish clan dresses in a different tartan from another, or on a national level where costumes provide an immediate identification of a person with a particular country, and therefore history, set of values, or political ideology.

We also decided that the visual representation could not be hierarchical or focus on any one Asian country as being more important than others. To achieve this, images were set up in CommonSpot to rotate automatically each time a page was visited.

Henning enlisted the cooperation of anyone on campus she knew who possessed Asian textiles, both natives of Asian countries or other faculty, staff or students who had acquired textiles. Contributors brought their textiles to the office of Newman, who at the time was Instructional Technology Consultant for Harriot College and assisted in various technological aspects of the Asian Studies Program. Newman photographed the textiles and using Photoshop prepared images of the correct size for the web pages. So far we have placed on the web site over 160 textiles, representing 22 faculty, staff, students and members of the ECU community, both men and women. The URL for the site is http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/asianstudies/.

As contributors brought their Asian textiles and artifacts to us to be photographed, it quickly became apparent that the textiles often had emotional or memory value for the owner. As cloths were spread or handled, they evoked a story about a place, a person, or an important event in the owner's life. Since Newman is also trained as a folklorist with quilt making in North Carolina as a primary research focus, she suggested that this was like quilt makers and owners who associate particular fabrics with pieces of their history and lives. She suggested that we use the textiles images to create a virtual friendship quilt, with the goal of building a community of interest through the sharing of information, experiences, and reactions of people at the university and in the Greenville area who would support and promote Asian studies in the future.

The Friendship Quilt Tradition

Our project draws on the history of quilt making in the United States (Orlofsky and Orlofsky, 1974), where an important subtype of the patchwork quilt since the mid-

nineteenth century has been the album or friendship quilt that contains blocks contributed by a group of people and is often quilted by the group as a gift offering to one person. Friendship quilts served many purposes: a farewell gift for someone such as a minister who was leaving the community, a commemoration of a special event such as a boy coming of age or a wedding, or a memento honoring a special person. The maker often signed his or her block in ink or embroidery and sometimes added a sentimental verse. (For an overview of album quilts, see Erma Hughes Kirkpatrick, "Warming Hearts and Raising Funds," Chapter 5 in Roberson, 1988.) In the 20th century, church groups or community organizations such as volunteer fire departments often used album quilts as fundraisers. The quilt top was sometimes embroidered with the names of people who made a small financial contribution for each name added and the completed quilt auctioned to raise even more money. In all these uses, the creation of the quilt became a community event that reinforced the position of both the creators and the recipient within the group and strengthened each person's identity within the community.

Digital Counterparts of Fabric Quilts

The creation of digital quilts, particularly as a collaborative effort, is an increasingly popular activity that, like fabric quilts, serves a variety of purposes. Digital quilts range from personal creations (e.g., The Nature Quilt, http://www.playdamage.org/nature/ or MyStoryQuilt: creating community one patch at a time, http://www.digitalstoryquilt.com/) to memory quilts celebrating an individual (In Loving Memory: Rhiannon's Digital Quilt, http://www.rhiannonmiller.com/quilt/), to quilts created by students as part of their schoolwork (examples include Identify Quilt: General Lesson, http://reta.nmsu.edu/traincd/quilt/lesson.html and Digital Quilt [silent] http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/003760.php and http://www.wac.ucla.edu/extensionsjournal/v2/peltz.htm).

Fabric quilts have long served as a locus for the projection of emotions, desires or dreams, and digital quilts do the same. Like the well-known and powerful AIDS memorial quilt begun in 1987 and now the largest ongoing community arts project in the world (http://www.aidsquilt.org/), digital quilts can be a place for communities to express their support of others, as in the Digital Quilt: A Tribute begun in October of 2001 that provided a forum for individuals to offer videotaped messages of support for the victims of 9-11 (http://lcweb4.loc.gov/911/catalog/2040.html).

Digital quilts, like their fabric counterparts since the 1970s, provide a metaphorical space for discourses about gender, race, identity and community; see, for example, the LGBT Digital Quilt (http://www.thecentersd.org/digital/digitalquilt.php) which collects and displays the stories of San Diego's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community. Digital quilts also exist as counterparts to fabric "art" quilts, in both individual and collaborative form (Quilt Project by Cynthia Rubin, Rhode Island School of Design, http://faculty.risd.edu/faculty/cbrubin/imaging/quilt.html); Katherine Wakid's Stitchories, http://www.craftzine.com/blog/archive/2006/08/katherine_wakids_digital_quilt.html.

Using Technology to Build Community

With the development of the WorldWideWeb in the past few decades there has been an increasing emphasis on the necessity of finding ways to use technology to create and sustain community, in both public and educational venues. Public venues include numerous virtual or online social communities or communities of interest that range from electronic mailing lists, chat rooms, blogs and wikis to more complex virtual environments such as MUDS, MUSHes and MOOs or complex virtual worlds where participants interact with a simulated environment or with virtual artifacts as well as with other participants; they even buy, sell and trade possessions, material (eBay) or virtual (or have virtual sex), often through the medium of digital personae or "avatars." In general, these are primarily visual experiences occasionally supplemented by other sensory information such as sound or, using specialized equipment, even a virtual sense of touch. (For a discussion of the technology involved, see The Encyclopedia of Virtual Environments, http://www.hitl.washington.edu/scivw/EVE/.)

As educational institutions have embraced these new technologies for teaching and learning, educators have become increasingly interested in ways to build community for pedagogical purposes, and certain attitudes and assumptions are becoming institutionalized within the discourse of online teaching and learning. There is a growing literature of concrete recommendations, guidelines and best practices for building and sustaining online community. (See, for example, Boetchher and Conrad, 2004, Palloff and Pratt, 2005.)

Imagining Community

However, as Michael Cole has recently shown, instead of rushing to adapt these new technologies, we need to understand the special characteristics of today's mobile, distributed, global communication. He warns, "Yes there are potentials for creating community using the Internet, but achieving that potential is not automatic, easy, or necessarily enduring. Like freedom, it is a fragile accomplishment that must be constantly worked at and watched over." (Cole, 2002, p. xxv)

Shumar and Renninger (2002) posit that all communities are symbolic constructions that depend on the images their participants hold and how they enact them. Participants can understand a community in different ways, and the same community can be different for different participants. Our definition of community and expectations about what community can be inform both the language we use to describe community and the communities we create. Virtual communities involve a combination of physical and virtual interaction, social imagination, and personal identity. One must be able to imagine belonging to be part of a community. "An ideal of community apparently leads people to invest themselves in the Internet and the sets of imagined and desired interactions the Internet affords." (Shumar and Renninger, 2002, p. 8)

One contemporary discourse about community, not unlike the Utopian discourses during the Industrial Revolution, is based on nostalgia for the spirit of community that we have supposedly lost, which involves notions of family, kin, shared values, and intimacy. Some theorists view online communities as the site where this kind of community can be regained. "It is not surprising," according to Shumar and Renninger, "that the discourse of community is ubiquitous and distinctions between traditional and modern are once again being used to explore the new postmodern utopia – the high-tech social form that can return us to so-called traditional values and intimate personal relationships. This is the language we have for describing our present experience." [Shumar and Renninger (2002), p. 5].

Computer-mediated communication is cheap and instantaneous and allows new opportunities for interaction that can foster networks and reciprocal processes and thereby influence social relationships, but it is less personal and more restrictive than communication in person. Despite its ability to make communication easy and to disseminate images and sound widely, computer-mediated community is often reduced to written communication that may be supplemented with sound and images. (Shumar and Renninger, 2002, p. 9) The definition of community in this environment emphasizes bonding and participation. "As a result, groups who cast the Internet as a creative new social medium typically describe the lurker, or noncontributor, as someone who is shirking social responsibility. Concerns about lurking exist precisely because the virtual world has no physical presence, and interaction in this world becomes more highlighted." (Shumar and Renninger, 2002, p. 6)

The Metaphorical Value of Quiltmaking and Patchworking

Even though quilt making blossomed as a domestic and decorative art during the 19th century, quilts have always been linked to their familial, social and political contexts. They have served as gifts and barter, linked generations together through shared experience and memory, and been associated with major transitions or gateways in the life journey such as birth, marriage, and death. Quilt patterns have memorialized political movements and sentiments (Tippecanoe and Tyler Too) or historic events such as the exploration of space.

Quilts have long been associated with narratives, evoking stories of people or events associated with a particular piece of cloth or the quilt itself. A commonplace assertion is that a quilt is a text from which, if we know how, we can read its maker's desires, hopes and dreams. Quilts have also functioned widely as metaphors, not only as explicit literary metaphors as in the writings of Alice Walker or Toni Morrison, but as a cultural metaphor for the simplicity and purity of pre-urban life and the rural past that we all long for, or as personal metaphors for the women who made them and their communities, or their work, *i.e.,* quilt making as a social art and the sisterhood of communal women's work. Most Americans accept the notion that the patchwork quilt made of sewing scraps and used for warmth was somehow synonymous with the development of democracy, despite the fact that all evidence points to its origin as a status symbol created for

display by women of wealth. It is not surprising, then, the quilt has also been subsumed under the postmodern rhetoric of texts and discourses, the textile as TEXTile. (See, *e.g.,* Elsley, 1996.)

The prevalence of the quiltmaking or patchworking metaphor in current cultural studies is illustrated by an English course offered at the University of Florida in 2002 entitled, "Writing about Personal Patchworks: Piecing Music, Images, and Texts in the Electronic Age" in which students were to use the metaphor of "patchworking" for the act of piecing together to make meaning. The course description reveals the instructor's underlying, and unquestioned, assumption that the construction of a patchwork quilt is equivalent to the creation of a democracy, and treats as equivalents patchwork, heraldic crests (the social antithesis of patchwork!), movies, and one's life:

> "Using the metaphor of "patchworking," we will explore the notion of E Pluribus Unum ("One From Many") in a variety of media. In constructing personal patchworks such as heraldic crests (composed of your favorite bands, movies, vacations, cars, etc.); concepts of "nation," ethnicity, and food; and soundtracks (what are the songs that underscore the "movie" of your life and why?), we will rely on the use of web images and texts to make meaning from constrasts [*sic*]. We will also explore the political, social, and historical significances of patchwork quilts and what relevance they may have for our own personal patchworks." [http://web.english.ufl.edu/courses/undergrad/2002spring_low-d.html, retrieved June 1, 2007].

The second course, entitled, "Writing about the Piecing Together of Meaning: Material Quilts, Electronic Quilts, and the Monster's Result," uses patchwork as a metaphor for writing an essay, but incorporates the familiar quilt-related themes of gender, race, political resistance, and self-construction:

> In this class, we will study quilts as texts, "reading" the materials of our lives in our construction of web, MOO, and material quilt squares. Quilting will be both subject that we are reading about in various texts by authors such as Alice Walker and Margaret Atwood, and the method that we are attempting to employ in piecing together different elements in the composition of academic essays. In writing papers, students will be encouraged to explore questions of gender, race, art vs. craft, and the sometimes-subversive stitchery that has been carried through from antique quilts to Shelley Jackson's contemporary hypertext quilting in Patchwork Girl. The NWE lab provides the opportunity to juxtapose two similar types of "piecing" together to make meaning; in pushing on the idea of 'patchworking,' students will construct a patch of their own in web and material form, analyzing the processes, strengths, and permanence of both media." [http://web.english.ufl.edu/courses/undergrad/2002spring_low-d.html, retrieved June 1, 2007].

These two examples are indicative of the extent to which the metaphor of quiltmaking has infiltrated postmodern social, political and academic discourses with little consideration of the appropiateness of equating it to other mental or creative processes.

<u>Implications for our project</u>

In designing our project, we have heeded published guidelines for creating online communities. To help create a community of interest to support Asian Studies at ECU, we decided on a series of activities that would involve increasingly complex levels of communication exchange, as discussed by Boettcher (2004).

1) First, we decided to develop a digital friendship quilt from textiles contributed by the participants. We would solicit participation by email and conversation. This would involve **interaction** through brief communication exchanges between participants and organizers, but would not necessarily promote the team-building process or help participants assume responsibility for the community we wished to create. The creation of a visible though virtual object would reward participation and encourage a sense of belonging and pride. Because we wanted the quilt to be viewable on an average monitor, we decided to begin with a quilt of 20 blocks that would include almost all contributors, and possibly create other quilts for the remainder of the textiles.

Each block within the quilt would consist of three layers. The top layer would contain the contributor's fabric placed into a traditional quilt pattern. We chose the Monkey Wrench pattern because it was straightforward and gave a central space to display the contributor's "signature." We decided to place the name in type rather than to scan an actual signature because of identity theft concerns. The chosen pattern was created in a size that allowed us to use the images we had already created for the CommonSpot web site. Using a fixed size selection box, we could split each fabric strip into two halves and duplicate those to create the four strips necessary for each block. The block template was created from an Asian fabric that was fairly neutral but contained small amounts of a variety of colors that could relate to numerous fabrics and designs. The background fabric was scanned from an actual piece of neutral fabric.

A second layer would be the "backing" for each block; the template used was a scan of the muslin back of a Monkey Wrench quilt. This layer would contain information about the contributor and his or her relationship to ECU. The third layer would be the batting or "stuffing." We envisioned this as a container for whatever kind of content the contributor wished to place there—text, photographs, audio, video. We asked each contributor for a "story" of the block—how and why the textile was acquired, the people associated with it, their familial, cultural or historical background-- and for any additional content he or she would like to include. We hoped to create a context in which we could recount to each other our narratives, and one where people felt free to include personal stories or not as they felt comfortable. These stuffings vary widely, from a short paragraph to photo galleries or personal artwork.

Newman created the virtual quilt using Photoshop. We discovered that it was a very labor-intensive and time-consuming process, made more difficult by the fact that

recently-installed security software has lengthened the amount of time required to publish changes to CommonSpot, which is already clunky and time consuming to use.

Contributors have participated enthusiastically in this beginning phase of the project, and some amount of excitement has been generated. The virtual quilt impressed a grant auditor, who called it " a fresh and artistic means of building community." The quilt can be viewed at http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/asianstudies/virtualquilt/ASvirtualquilt.cfm.

2) The second phase of our virtual quilt project was planned as an activity that involved **collaboration**, requiring that participants work together on a particular activity during a set period of time. Participants would share a common short-term goal, but the limited duration might deter the establishment of interdependency and individual responsibility. The activity we planned was to use WIKI technology to create a virtual "textile marketplace" where participants could describe textiles from their places of origins within a collaborative community setting. We had convinced our computer services department to install MediaWiki software on a server temporarily. However, ECU has decided to add WIKI and blogging capabilities to its course management software Blackboard, and because of security concerns and lack of programmers it was decided to remove the MediaWiki server. Using Blackboard would not meet our needs for our project because some contributors were not members of our campus network and could not be authenticated as users and access Blackboard, and because we wanted our content to be available to the public in general.

As an alternative, we decided to create a blog, where we hoped contributors would add descriptions of their textiles and the stories associated with them. We posted small thumbnails of each textile used with a brief teaser statement about it and asked for comments. The blog segment of the project is in its initial stages. Participation has been limited. This may be a result of the fact that the contributors had just sent content for their blocks via email and felt no urge to repeat this in a blog. The was set up late in the semester during a busy pre-exam time, and that may have discouraged people from taking time to comment. Few people showed familiarity with a blogging environment. We believe it will take some modeling and some training in the technology to encourage participation, but because most faculty and students are gone for the summer this will have to wait until fall semester. Visit the blog at http://virtualfriendshipquilt.blogspot.com/

3) The final level of communication planned is the use of the blog to foster **cooperation** in the form of a dialogue among contributors in response to questions about their personal intercultural experiences. This arose from a discussion between Henning and Newman about the act of placing Asian textiles into an American art form and whether this was an act of cultural imperialism of cultural bridging. Because all of the participants are currently living in the United States and involved with an American academic institution, we saw a parallel between humans existing within what was for some an alien culture, and textiles existing within an alien art framework.

We are aware that we are treading a dangerous ground in this project by combining a traditional domestic feminine craft form of the quilt with the contemporary global technology form of the Internet. We recognize the potential dual pitfalls that each element can produce. We wish to avoid the projection of nostalgic Utopian imaginings onto either patchwork or community. We also want to resist the tendency of our contemporary, predominantly urban society to image those who are different from us as the feminine "other," which would be particularly easy because we are dealing with the art form of quilt making so often associated with "the primitiveness and piety of the local community." (Perry, 1993)

We decided to make our questions about how cultures interact explicit and the central focus of the virtual quilt blog. We have asked key faculty in Religious Studies and Anthropology for input in developing a series of questions that we will ask contributors to respond to, a few at a time. For this to be successful, we will need buy-in by the contributors. Although we have posted our first set of questions, the time frame of the academic year means that we will have to wait until the fall semester begins to initiate this phase of the project. If this is successful, we hope it will result in the participants' becoming interdependent but also contributing independently with minimal guidance.

4) our final goal is the creation of a **learning community** at ECU of people to support and sustain Asian Studies long term. It remains to be seen whether the virtual friendship quilt and its accompanying blog will contribute successfully to this goal, but we are optimistic that it will.

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