

IMMIGRANT BLOGGERS AND SENSEMAKING: TECHNOLOGY MEDIATED ACCULTURATION AND CULTURAL BROKERAGE

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Millions of people are engaged in work abroad every year either through migration, expatriation or short overseas assignments. Understanding how people deal with foreign cultures and contexts is of key importance for individuals and organizations employing them, and has been the focus of management research since the late 1970's (see Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991 for a review). A common theme in the expatriate and cultural adjustment literature is the importance of cultural training and cultural translators in facilitating the transition into new cultures (e.g. Soloman, 1994; Janssens, 1995; Steers, Nardon & Sanchez-Runde, in press).

For the purpose of this research we conceptualize acculturation as a process of sensemaking and focus on the role played by sociocultural brokers (Glanz, Williams & Hoekesema, 2001). Sociocultural brokers are individuals who distribute knowledge, and that are able to bridge cultures and influence interpretation between cultures. Through personal accounts

and stories, cultural brokers develop relationships and help individuals to make sense of discrepancies or problems and identify solutions and appropriate actions.

The emergence and growing popularity of social media in general, and blogs in particular, have provided sojourner and migrants new mechanisms to acquire and share cultural information. A blog is a website or part of a website where people post material on a regular basis. A blog is the equivalent of an online diary except that it is meant for public distribution and stimulates a conversation with other likeminded individuals. The number of blogs is growing exponentially, and it was estimated in November of 2011 to be at about 175 million (Pensato, 2011). Initially, bloggers used blogs as a mean to communicate with friends and family, but increasingly, bloggers are using blogs to communicate with other bloggers (Technorati, 2011). These conversations generate virtual communities as bloggers comment on and provide links to other blogs.

The blogs of immigrants offer a window into the process of acculturation. They provide longitudinal, rich, present tense accounts of every day events and reflections, which are the foundation of sensemaking and acculturation. Thus, immigrant blogs provide a unique and valuable data source for studying acculturation.

We conceptualize immigrant and expatriate bloggers as a new generation of sociocultural brokers. New media provides these blogging sociocultural brokers with different tools provided such as interactivity, connectivity, multimedia (not only text, but also images, movies and audio), and immediacy. These blogging sociocultural brokers also have the potential to reach a significantly broader audience than their traditional counterparts. Despite their increasing importance, we know very little about how they operate and their potential impact in the acculturation process.

In this study we investigate how blogging technology influences the process of acculturation and cultural brokerage through an analysis of blogs written by foreign individuals living in Canada. Our objective is to develop a process model of technology mediated acculturation and cultural brokerage.

Theoretical Framework

We approach the process of acculturation through a sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995; Glanz et al., 2001). Sensemaking is a collaborative, social process of creating shared understanding and meaning. (Weick, 1995). Individuals simultaneously enact and react to their environments through their shared narratives (Currie & Brown, 2003; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; Harris, 1994). Shared narratives help people to organize their experiences, understand what they think and predict future events and outcomes (Isabella, 1990; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking may be instigated by a discrepancy (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994) or a surprise (Louis, 1980) and involves asking, “What’s going on here?” and then “What should I do?” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking results in learning (Daft & Weick, 1984) or modified schema (Harris, 1994). Learning and new or modified schema then influence which events or discrepancies are noticed and how they are interpreted (Daft and Weick, 1984), feeding the cycle of ongoing sensemaking and the process of acculturation.

Collectively, immigrant blogs provide an opportunity to trace the process of immigrant sensemaking as bloggers construct shared, public narratives. Blogs provide a record of what bloggers notice and experience as discrepancies and their shared answers to “what’s going on here?” and “what should be done?” Changes over time in the content of individual blogs, what is noticed, and how discrepancies are interpreted, provide an opportunity to trace learning and subsequent sensemaking. Finally, threads of comments, questions and responses, provide a

means to explore the actions and role of cultural brokers in the sensemaking process.

Methodology

Given the absence of studies exploring technology influences on acculturation and cultural brokerage, we propose a qualitative, exploratory study. Because we are concerned with actors' interpretations of their host culture and context, we adopt an interpretive approach and assumptions. Interpretive studies assume that people act on the basis of their interpretations of the world. Through their actions, people enact social realities and endow them with meaning (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Smircich and Stubbard, 1985; Weick, 1979; Orlikowski and Gash, 1994). We use a grounded theory approach to analyze the data allowing initial analysis and findings to inform and focus subsequent iterations of data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Straus and Corbin, 1990; Birks & Mills, 2011).

Data collection

We identified blogs through a search in technorati.com. Technorati.com is an Internet search engine specializing in searches of blogs. We searched for the key words “Canada immigrant” (43 results), “Canadian immigrant” (19 results), “foreigner Canada” (3 results), “immigrate Canada” (52 results), “Canada expatriate” (21 results), “Canada expat” (59 results), “Expatriate in Canada” (39 results).

We eliminated duplicates, blogs not written in English, blogs not written by foreigners living in Canada, and blogs not related to immigration or life abroad. For example, a blog about saving money or cooking that happened to be written by a Canadian immigrant but that did not address immigration or living abroad was not included. We also excluded blogs inactive for more than 2 years. This resulted in 18 blogs. We used a snowball technique and looked at the blogrolls

and link pages of each of the 18 blogs. Through this process, we identified an additional 27 blogs. There was one case in which a blogger ran two blogs. We merged the two blogs for our preliminary analysis resulting in a total of 44 blogs.

We reviewed the about pages—pages typically describing the purpose and history of the blog and blogger—of the 44 blogs and identified the bloggers motivation for writing the blog. We grouped motivations into categories including, providing immigration and local information (10), sharing life (17), sharing life in Canada (24), and selling or showcasing products and services (7). We then narrowed the sample to include only blogs in which the blogger specifically identified their intention of discussing their experiences moving to Canada in their about page. Our final blog sample consists of 24 blogs. These 24 bloggers come from 12 different countries, most arrived in Canada in the last 8 years, and, we estimate, have published between 10 and 200 posts related to living in Canada. Figure 1 illustrates our current sample by time of arrival and blogging period.

Figure 1: Sample of blogs

Blog Name	Country of Origin	1997...	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Welcome Canuck	Philippines			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
WMTC	USA			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Wondrous Canadian Renewal	USA				x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
The Expatriate Mind	USA				x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Expat Travels	USA				x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cooking in someone else's kitchen	UK					x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Correr es mi destino	France					x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Two moms to Canada	USA					x	x	x	x	x	x	
Canada Immigrant's Blog	Middle East					x	x	x	x	x	x	x
How to live in Canada	Brazil						x	x	x	x	x	
Prairie Road	USA						x	x	x	x	x	x
ESL Blog	Asia						x	x	x	x	x	
Aiglee Canada	Venezuela						x	x	x	x	x	x
Sammylicious	Australia						x	x	x	x	x	x
Canadian Boomdiada	USA							x	x	x	x	
Canada Pisani	USA							x	x	x	x	x
Alice in Canada	USA							x	x	x	x	
Dear to Toronto	South Asia						x	x	x	x	x	x
Filipino in Canada	Philippines							x	x	x	x	
The Zieglers Blog	Argentina									x	x	x
Dear England, Love Canada	UK									x	x	x
Expatlogue	UK										x	
My journey as a newcomer in Canada	Mexico										x	

In the figure above the shaded areas represent years living in Canada, while the “x” represents years of blogging. As it can be observed, some bloggers start blogging before moving

to Canada, some upon arrival, and some a few years after arrival.

We are currently in the process of collecting relevant blog posts for further analysis. We are collecting all posts that are related to life in Canada, immigration, culture, and cultural comparisons. Bloggers vary widely in their interests and many blog about a diversity of topics, including hobbies and personal interests as well as other personal events (having a baby, illness in the family, etc.) that are not relevant to this study.

Data Analysis

We will analyze the data in accordance with principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Birks & Mills, 2011). We will start with emergent coding supported by the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose. This approach involves comparing and contrasting the data with the researcher's evolving theory throughout the data collection and analysis process. We will then create tables displaying the data and codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994) in order to identify relationships and patterns. Given the grounded theory approach of our study, the exact codes will emerge from the data. However, our initial review of the literature and our data suggest the following broad categories.

Acculturation: we will code for feelings and emotions and personal reflections

Sensemaking: we will code for observations of discrepancies (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994) or surprises (Louis, 1980), questions and answers to “what is going on here” and “what should be done” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), including issues and answers (Ocasio, 1997). In addition we will note inputs to sensemaking including other's interpretations and past experiences (Louis, 1980).

Cultural brokerage: we will code for advice, information, and cultural comparisons. We will also code for evidence of brokerage such as response to solicited questions.

We will analyze the data overtime, and look for temporal influences, changes in the prominence of themes overtime, and links between key categories.

Expected Contributions

We expect that the outcome of this study will be the elaboration of a process model of technology mediated acculturation and cultural brokerage, which will inform the literature and practice of international assignments. Despite broad recognition of the importance of cultural brokers for the process of acculturation and adaptation to foreign environments, we know very little about how emergent technologies are changing the way culture brokers operate and their influence on acculturation processes. Organizations employing or supporting foreigners will benefit from the understanding of how blogging technologies can be utilized to facilitate the dissemination of sociocultural information and facilitate the acculturation process.

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