

Book Review – Telecollaboration 2.0: Language, Literacies and Intercultural Learning in the 21st Century

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Book Review - Telecollaboration 2.0: Language, Literacies and Intercultural Learning in the 21st Century

Editors: Sarah Guth and Francesca Helm (2010)
Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 475 pp.
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As the title indicates, telecollaboration 2.0, or online intercultural exchange, is the focus of the book edited by Sarah Guth and Francesca Helm from the University of Padova (Italy). This volume, which is the first work that deals specifically with telecollaboration in a Web 2.0 context, marks the strong beginning of the new series “Telecollaboration in Education,” which two key players in online language and culture instruction, Melinda Dooley and Robert O’Dowd, have launched for Peter Lang Publishing. The book aptly combines in-depth discussion of recent and emerging critical issues related to telecollaboration 2.0 with the experimental and critical approach to intercultural learning, mainly in the context of foreign language education, an area of expertise for the majority of contributors. The book’s four parts unite research and practice findings from Europe, Latin America, Asia, and USA. The first part focuses on new trends and environments in telecollaboration. The second part highlights new skills and competencies of language learner 2.0, while the third part takes a look at language educator 2.0. The fourth part consists of the analysis of eight case studies that efficiently bridge research and practice and vividly illustrate changes in teaching and learning opportunities that technology brings and continues to bring to researchers, practitioners, instructors, and students all over the world. The contributors share a view of telecollaboration 2.0. as both a tool and mindset, shaped by the learners’ desire to use new technologies to communicate and collaborate and to construct together knowledge and artefacts. In this context, teachers and students are engaged with a collective, constructivist approach to learning, which challenges boundaries between mutually enriching ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ worlds.

As Guth and Helm perceptively observe in their informative introduction, new technologies

define the social and technical contexts of learning and perpetuate the growing need for “multiple literacies.” This concept is related to languages; it is instrumental for identifying three overlapping competencies, which are highly desirable for successful communication in telecollaboration settings: language skills, intercultural communicative competence, and new online literacies. The authors view “new online literacies” as a distinctive feature of telecollaboration 2.0, pointing out the need to develop new pedagogies to enhance preparation of the learners for participation in online community, the engagement, which increasingly becomes part of their multiple identities. The authors conclude that both the sociocultural potential as well as complexities that emerge in telecollaboration exemplify the increasingly complex, connected, global society in which learners do and will operate.

In the first part of the volume, the contributors explore new trends and environments in telecollaboration, with particular emphasis on creative ways of integrating informal online communication in language instruction. Opening this part with “Telecollaboration with Web 2.0 Tools,” authors Guth and Thomas indicate that various modes of communication and new environments can be easily accessed with Web 2.0 tools. They notice that whereas some educators still prefer the “safe” environment of closed learning management systems (LMS), the ‘real world’ style communication available through the Web is increasingly chosen for collaborative projects. Stimulating examples of the use of social networks in telecollaboration vividly illustrate the advantages of the integration of ‘real life’ communication practices in education. In “The Multifarious Goals of Telecollaboration 2.0: Theoretical and Practical Implications,” Helm and Guth discuss task-based language learning and a pedagogy of multiliteracies for telecollaboration 2.0, drawing on such competencies as play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, and distributed cognition. They distinguish four major components of the pedagogy of multiliteracy: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice.

In “Telecollaboration and Learning 2.0,” Lamy and Goodfellow suggest that in order to identify and manage “the collision” of cultures of learning, a critical literacy stance on the power relations underlying both formal and informal interaction in social web environments is required. They suggest that this can be achieved through the successful combination of “epideictic” communication, defined by Barbara Warnick as a celebration of consensually held values such as social-networking practices and “power of the crowd,” with “deliberative” critique of the cultural nature of such communication. The authors notice that this combination can be of value to practitioners of telecollaborative language learning who are engaged in Web 2.0. Outlining directions for further research, they point out the necessity to view telecollaboration as an educational culture, a potential subject to the critique that other educational cultures receive, including power relations.

Thorne argues that informal intercultural communication is an important element of this culture in his insightful chapter, “The ‘Intercultural Turn’ and Language Learning in Crucible New Media.” He discusses intercultural networks, fan fiction, gaming, and language use in event-driven scenarios in order to demonstrate the aesthetic and stylistic shifts in contexts, purposes, and genres of expression associated with “new-media-in-the-wild” (p. 158). Thorne perceptively suggests that activities enhanced by the new media require a

response and proactive vision of educators. He states that it is necessary to support greater epistemological and linguistic pluralism that corresponds to the vision of language as an open, non-static system.

In “Virtual Worlds for Foreign Language Learning and Intercultural Exchange: Is it for Real?,” Panichi, Deutschmann, and Molka-Danielsen explore the potential of a virtual environment, specifically of Second Life, for development of new approaches to learning and teaching in the context of telecollaboration. They indicate that boundaries between virtual worlds as well as between non-virtual and virtual worlds become more and more subtle. “How will this process affect our understanding of language and culture, and identity and place?” (p. 191). This important question remains open for future research.

The second part of the book, “Language Learner 2.0: New Skills and Competences,” starts with the chapter entitled “Learner 2.0” by Guerin, Cigognini, and Pettenati. These authors focus on the analysis of basic and higher order skills required for life-long learning in the 21st century and discuss conditions related to individual, technology, and time management skills, which can enable their development. In line with such researchers as Lemke and van Helden, they emphasize the importance of the affective dimension in Learning 2.0.

In the next chapter, “Telecollaboration: At the Interface between Multimodal and Intercultural Communicative Competence,” Hauck reflects on telecollaboration 2.0 as a product of the age of “Participatory Cultures.” She suggests that multimodal communicative competence, which includes skills and knowledge about how to take part and how to invite participation in collaborative environments, is important for a critical understanding and assessment of new media and is a pre-condition for successful involvement in participatory cultures.

In the last chapter in this section, “The Multilingual Internet,” Hughes suggests that adopting bilingual or even multilingual pedagogical and learning strategies is likely to increase language learners’ ability to operate autonomously online. She argues that Web 2.0 opens up a wide range of computer-mediated human interactions that approaches what is available in the physical world. One may add that blurring the distance in time and space, computer-mediated interaction can enrich face-to-face communication by opening new routes for diverse interaction and collaborative work.

The focus of Part 3 is on the “language educator 2.0.” In her chapter “Teacher 2.0,” Dooley perceptively observes that Web 2.0 invites a more dynamic style of teaching that stimulates and orients students towards critical thinking. This style requires a change in the vision of the instruction, which is no longer associated with a transmission of knowledge. The emphasis is, instead, on knowledge building, where interaction goes in three ways: teacher-student, student-student, and student-teacher. A teacher’s competence, therefore, becomes increasingly related to her or his ability to integrate 2.0 tools and to create a community of learners that extends beyond traditional classrooms.

In “Integrating Telecollaboration into the Language Classroom: Some Insights,” Fursten-

berg and Levet share lessons learned from ten years of teaching French in a blended environment, “Cultura,” designed at MIT as an intercultural project. They consider the construction of knowledge as an unfinished process and view the assessment of this process as a major challenge for educators. Facing this challenge with confidence and creativity, Furstenberg and Levet outline two constructive approaches to assessment. The first approach calls for evaluation of students’ portfolios, or ‘log books,’ where students detail what they learn every week, what discoveries they have made about the other culture and their own, and what questions remain unanswered. In the authors’ opinion, these assignments reflect learners’ ability to do close reading or to come up with valid interpretations of the material. The second approach calls for evaluation of students’ analytical skills, perhaps by asking them to apply a set of materials that they have studied in new contexts.

The topic of assessment is further addressed in “Issues in the Assessment of Online Interaction and Exchange,” where O’Dowd describes assessment of online intercultural exchange, in particular intercultural communicative competence, as a particularly difficult task. He points out that the challenges involve ethical issues of assessing attitudes and skills of intercultural communicative competence, practical issues of ‘calibrating’ intercultural skills and new online literacies into levels, and pedagogical strategies of rewarding certain types of online activities over others. Nevertheless, the author asserts that these issues should be confronted by online educators, so that the assessment criteria reflect the attitudes, skills, and competencies they would like their learners to develop.

The book ends with case studies that illustrate different ways of implementing new forms of telecollaboration, enhanced by Web 2.0 tools. These include interdisciplinary collaboration, as in the Virtual Harlem Project, intercultural projects with exchange between students from Italy and Australia, USA and Japan, and Chile and the Netherlands, and the Solya Connect Program that involves learners in the West and in the Arab world. Each discussion is centered around the following aspects of telecollaboration projects: context, objectives, project phases and task types, assessment, and project evaluation. Though the case studies deal mostly with language and culture instruction, the guidance on project organization, task design, and the insights on pedagogical strategies and assessment can be useful for telecollaboration projects in different educational contexts.

An insightful discussion of practical and theoretical underpinnings of the emerging educational culture of telecollaboration through a variety of perspectives makes *Telecollaboration 2.0: Language, Literacies and Intercultural Learning in the 21st Century* an excellent resource for researchers and practitioners who are ready to use their imagination and open their minds to intercultural adventures in education without borders.

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