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Victoria Antoniadou
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
Email: Victoria.Antoniadou@campus.uab.cat

Telecollaboration 2.0 Language, Literacies and Intercultural Learning in the 21st Century is the first volume of the series Telecollaboration in Education and is intended to support more awareness around the activity of telecollaboration in educational settings. It generally focuses on the pedagogical implications and the learning potentials of this activity in terms of intercultural competence, language and skill learning (for participation in online communities). In this book, educationalists from around the Western world, with varied experience in implementing telecollaboration for language learning (LL) and intercultural (communicative) competence (ICC) share their experiences and knowledge of this activity.

The authors and editors use the term Telecollaboration 2.0 to denote the enhanced scope of telecollaboration in the specific context of the 21st century, featuring the advent of Web 2.0 tools – Skype, wikis, forums, blogs, social networking platforms, and virtual environments; it brings together not only language learners in geographically distant locations, but also learners of other subjects, and unrolls in one or more languages.

Considering globalization and the compelling advancement of technology in the present era, this is an important moment for such contribution. The rise of the Internet and Web 2.0 tools entail new modes of living, and thus new literacies for effective participation in online communities, doing business, and socializing with people from different cultural backgrounds. As the authors make clear, in the context of the 21st century and Telecollaboration 2.0, culture transcends traditional narrow national borders to encompass a more globalized sense. The new demands call for lifelong learners; multiliterate “world citizens” who are able to work collaboratively in multicultural/multilingual contexts, co-construct knowledge, and think critically.

This book refers to this context and conceptualizes Web 2.0 from the language educator’s standpoint (Guth and Helm, introduction of this volume). From the very first pages, the reader is brought to understand the implications of the new globalized society for language teaching/learning and ICC. The editors stress the need for education at all levels to find ways to effectively use the Internet for LL and ICC, and identify “new online literacies” as an additional learning dimension to LL and ICC, and goal of Telecollaboration 2.0. This term, according to the editors, encloses both a practical know-how to use the Web 2.0 tools, and new ways of thinking about participating, working, and generally managing in online communities.

Overall, the book comprises twenty chapters divided into four sections; namely New Trends and Environments in Telecollaboration; Language Learner 2.0: New Skills and Competences; Language Educator 2.0: New Skills and Competences; and Case Studies.

In the first section, the reader comes to understand the specifics of the “qualitative development of the first generation of the Web” (Guth and Thomas, p.42)
through a comparison of ‘last and new generation’ technologies for the classroom; namely Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. In Chapter Two, Helm and Guth adapt Byram’s model of intercultural competences and construct a 3-dimensional framework (operational, cultural, critical), to take into account the new sociocultural context of Telecollaboration 2.0 and the new perceptions of culture, the language learner, and ICC. They also discuss how the established methodological approach of Task-Based Language Learning in telecollaboration can benefit from a Pedagogy of Multiliteracies; and demonstrate the types, stages, tasks of telecollaborative projects through examples of telecollaborative projects already performed. In Chapter Three, Lamy and Goodfellow review the history of the notion of telecollaboration over the somewhat fifteen years of its existence, and give an account of the lessons learnt. They examine the institutional context of telecollaboration at a macro-level through a critical interrogation of the concepts of interculturalism, communication, and collaboration to allow a better understanding of the goals set for Learning 2.0. Following, Thorne provides a detailed description of contemporary virtual environments engaging intercultural partners, such as fan fiction platforms, MOOs (Multi-User Domain Object-Oriented), MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online). He displays findings from research on a telecollaborative exchange via the World of Warcraft (WoW) online gaming platform and discusses the transferability of this learning to formal L2 instruction. On the same tone, Panichi, Deutschmann, and Molka-Danielse focus on Virtual Worlds and SL (Second Life) in particular, and argue for their learning affordances through examples of projects carried out via SL. They contrast this mode of instruction with the traditional face to face, and discuss pedagogical considerations such as affect and learner attitudes, the use of avatars, learner participation, and assessment in virtual environments.

Section Two consists in designing the profile of 21st century learner (Learner 2.0). First, Guerin, Cigognini, and Pettenati’s present a model of basic and higher order skills through which they define Learner 2.0 as a lifelong learner, and discuss the competences required for Learning 2.0. Hauck goes on to describe a telecollaborative pilot project designed to help participating teacher trainees and language learners identify aspects of multimodal competence as component of the new media literacies required for membership in online participatory cultures; and discusses the lessons learned after its completion. Closing this section, Hughes discusses the reality of the multilingual Internet, as a space where different languages and dialects meet, and examines the online communication conventions observed during telecollaborative exchanges in terms of language choice (formal/informal language) and code-switching.

Following the identity of Learner 2.0, Section Three focuses on the profile of Teacher 2.0. Dooly defines the teacher of the 21st century and discusses the different conceptualizations of the teacher brought about by the advent of ICT over the years. She argues for the pedagogical implications of telecollaboration, contrasting the notions of group work and collaborative learning, and clarifying the notion of task. She allows insights into the mindset, skills, and general approach of Teacher 2.0 and elaborates on some of the teaching skills and competencies required from 21st century teachers, who aspire to effectively integrate telecollaboration into their teaching. Furstenberg and Levet describe a telecollaborative exchange as part of a ‘blended’ approach to language learning and teaching. They situate their arguments in the context of the Cultura project; describe the materials used in this project, the pedagogic rationale behind the selection of the materials, the practical use of these materials in the classroom and online. They emphasize the role of classroom work in
supporting beneficial engagement in the online exchanges, and explain how the classroom and online activities worked in parallel to ensure the benefits for LL and intercultural understanding. O'Dowd tackles the ‘sensitive’ issue of assessing the online activity. He reviews the Common European Framework for LL and discusses the lack of adequate assessment procedures to assess sociocultural and non-linguistic skills parallel to linguistic competences in foreign language classrooms; he explains the many practical, conceptual and ethical difficulties entailed in the formulation of such a unified model of assessment. He discusses the findings of a small-scale qualitative research where educators were asked about the content they assess and the problems they encounter in assessing intercultural competence in online activities. He identifies assessment rubrics and portfolios as the two most used techniques found in literature and discusses practical examples of assessment with these techniques.

The last section of the book offers readers practical examples of eight different telecollaboration projects carried out in diverse sociocultural contexts - principally Western. In some of these projects Web 2.0 tools were used, while others were carried out using closed LMS (Learning Management Systems). Each presentation ends with a critical evaluation of the telecollaborative project at hand, in terms of positive aspects and deficiencies, problems and difficulties encountered.

Telecollaboration counts on a relatively short history of nearly two decades in the scene of education, and has even more recently expanded to incorporate new possibilities that stem from the technological advancement. Despite the inherent problems in its application, which might often pose difficulties for educators, telecollaboration has been acknowledged as a very useful tool in the field of intercultural communication and ICC. Admittedly, the efficient use of technology for learning is not an easy task; Resistance to change is quite familiar to researchers who found that many teachers hesitate to integrate technology in their teaching practices despite its increasing availability in schools; Reasons have been identified to include lack technical support or ICT competence (Demetriadis et al. 2003) lack of training in using technology in the classroom (Laffey, 2004), background as learners through the one-way transmission model in technology-absent environments (Bennet, 1991); time and curriculum constraints (Karasevvidis, 2009). What is more, research, including this book, emphasizes the ‘trap’ in using technology in ways that disguise the traditional model of instruction. Thus, it is not just about using new technologies in the classroom; it is about creating new pedagogically sound models for teaching and learning to take in the enhanced learning affordances of these new tools; the question is to use these tools in their full potential to maximize valid learning outcomes in terms of communication, collaboration, sharing and co-construction of knowledge. This book proposes specific considerations for constructing learner-centered, technology-mediated, telecollaborative environments to avoid falling in this ‘trap’ and encourages educators who may be skeptical about telecollaboration to implement this tool in their practices.

On the whole, this book gives an overwhelming, yet comprehensive picture of the teacher and learner in the 21st century in terms of new roles and competences. It is an excellent tool to help educators see the various challenges the globalized world holds for them, and how the activity of telecollaboration can be used to face those challenges and bridge the gap between classroom and “real world” learning of foreign languages. Nevertheless, the book does not aim to present telecollaboration as the ideal tool to achieve the goals of 21st century education; a critical review of this practice in terms of educational possibilities and limitations is made very prominent to grant the reader the opportunity to learn from problems encountered in other
situations when telecollaborative projects were carried out. Very importantly there are critical discussions about central aspects of teaching such as assessment, dealing with the problematic nature of traditional assessment when it comes to evaluating online activity. The language used in the book is clear and accurate, and all the arguments are very pertinently supported by illustrative examples of projects which prompt the reader to get a full understanding of the practice. With all the above in mind, the contents of the book make it an important resource for all members of the educational community, language teachers– student teachers or serving teachers, with or no experience in implementing Telecollaboration 2.0.

Author References:

Victoria Antoniadou is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Teaching Language, Literature and Social Sciences at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Her research interests involve the application of Activity Theory in technology-mediated environments used for teacher training. The upcoming doctoral thesis looks into the process of teacher professionalization of a group of student teachers that takes place in the different phases of a year-long practicum course at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. It particularly focuses on the phase where aspects of telecollaboration were used, and thus seeks to pinpoint and elaborate on the role of this construction in the overall activity of teacher professionalization.

References


