



Virtual Ethnography and Intercultural Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Internet-mediated communication and the networked information environment present new potentialities and challenges for foreign language learning and teaching. The two main models of intercultural foreign language education that utilize the Internet to access technology-mediated communication are telecollaboration and tandem learning. A different model to use the Internet technology in accessing native speakers is to assign learners to study online foreign communities. These communities are created through computer-mediated social interaction in the target language and culture.

The aim of my presentation is firstly to examine and discuss a case study of three students, who explore online Italian communities by using strategies of virtual ethnography (e.g. observation, interview). One of the students explores a blog of a contemporary Italian novelist. The other student has been joining a social forum discussing the current Italian politics, and the last one participates in a blog of an Italian singer's fan group.

In the process of immersion in the life of the virtual community and in the interaction with its users, students collecting and analyzing different kinds of materials (e.g. texts, pictures, digital audio/video recordings, web pages) are involved in a creative exploration of the target culture. My focus will be on the pedagogy of this model of intercultural foreign language learning as virtual ethnographers, with particular emphasis on the way it helps students to go beyond a checklist approach to cultural knowledge, and improve their intercultural competence and language skills.