



The Critical Role of the Intra-cultural in Higher Education Telecollaborative Exchanges

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Abstract

The opportunities afforded by today's ICT tools and technologies in promoting cross cultural communication and language learning opportunities are vast. As a result, and together with the growing trend towards internationalization in higher education, many institutions are increasingly eager to participate in "virtual intercultural interaction and exchange projects between classes of foreign language learners in geographically distant locations" (O'Dowd, 2007 as cited in O'Dowd, 2013, p. 47). However, although they purport to promote intercultural communicative competence and increased knowledge of and sensitivity to the "other", the reality is that these telecollaborative initiatives tend to conceive 'culture' in monolithic terms, as being synonymous with the 'nation state', often resulting in blatant disregard of the plurilingual and multicultural landscape of the societies of the partners involved in the exchanges. Furthermore, the literature on telecollaboration in language teaching in higher education does not sufficiently address the issue of intra-cultural differences. Neglect of such issues in the design and management of telecollaborative exchanges in language teaching may reinforce, rather than bridge, feelings of difference, resulting in missed opportunities at best.

In a context such as Israel, directly dealing with intra-group differences may be threatening and potentially explosive. In this presentation we will posit that intercultural telecollaborative exchanges can be cleverly exploited to sensitize students to intra-cultural issues in a much less menacing way. By focusing on the "other", students may be gently coaxed into beginning their journey of reconciliation with the "other within," ultimately leading to recognition and hopefully acceptance of the "we".

Implications for the design and implementation of such telecollaborative exchanges will be presented, and examples and excerpts from projects involving Israeli university students, as well as student and instructor reflections will be used to illustrate.