Problematising Telecollaboration and Learning 2.0

Varying approaches have been taken to the description of ‘telecollaboration’. In the Introduction to this volume Helm and Guth offer what they call an ‘extended’ definition that includes ‘exchanges’ and more specifically ‘internet-based intercultural exchange’ in a variety of participant configurations. A narrower definition, by Dooly (2008), puts a more insistent focus on the collaborative component of the term ‘telecollaboration’: “Instead of [...] simply having interpersonal exchanges of information collection, telecollaboration aims at providing problem-solving objects that will facilitate genuine interaction (ibid: 67)”. Although the notion of authenticity (‘genuine’) in this definition is problematic, for the moment our interest is in Dooly’s foregrounding of problem-solving as a way to ensure that students “mov[e] beyond a simple ‘hook-up’”(ibid: 66), or, to put it more colloquially, putting ‘collaboration’ back into ‘telecollaboration’. In approaching this chapter’s task of confronting the notion of ‘telecollaboration’ with the notion of ‘Web 2.0’, the first difficulty is in the distance between the wider and the narrower definition above, and the second is in the lack of guidance on what ‘exchange’ and ‘problem-solving’ actually mean. In Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning, ‘collaborative’ is taken to imply that an exchange must resolve into not only a negotiation but also a production. But in language learning, negotiations can in
themselves be considered to be collaborative if turns build one upon the other, and a debate can, as Mangenot (2003) points out, be considered to be a production. This leads us to the proposal that the following activities, which may be structured into task-based scenarios, are important as objects of telecollaborative activity in language learning contexts: mining of language/cultural resources (or critical analysis of these) for production of a collaboratively negotiated object; debating in a foreign or second language for publication of a collaboratively-prepared document; and problem-solving, defined as work which “encourages active construction of knowledge through personal inquiry, the use of problems to form disequilibrium and subsequent accommodating inquiry, as well as social negotiation and work with peers” (Oliver 2000: 6).

In the light of this interpretation of telecollaboration, the telecollaborative undertaking is aligned with many of the principles that are currently informing the wider discussion of educational uses of Web 2.0, or the Social Web. O’Reilly (2005), for example, sees the Social Web as a way for business users to add value through user-driven social constructing, sharing and re-using. Educators interpret this ‘added value’ as an educational value. In their view, both telecollaboration and the Social Web embody values based on social co-creativity rather than on the kind of information transfers that have been characteristic of ‘the information society’. However, educators at the more technology-oriented end of the spectrum are already nurturing a new term-of-the-art, ‘Learning 2.0’ (or ‘e-Learning 2.0’) to describe the transformation of education to be brought about by the penetration of informal Web 2.0 communication and socialisation practices into formal learning (Downes 2005; Owen et al. 2006; Redecker, AlaMutka and Punie 2008; Seely Brown and Adler 2008; Walton, Weller and Conole 2008).

Although based in a familiar social constructivist paradigm of collaborative learning, cognitive apprenticeship, communities of practice, etc., the discourse of Learning 2.0 goes far beyond the merely pedagogical and envisages a radical shift in the social, cultural, and economic relations that currently govern the way the institutional
delivery of education in the developed world works. The 'business models' that are taking over from learning theory as the driving force behind the transformation of educational practice are further discussed below. Suffice it to say, for now, that if Telecollaboration 2.0 is to follow the logic of Learning 2.0, then the scope of innovation is likely to be far wider than the introduction of some new technologies into the repertoire of the language teacher. Moreover, the kinds of social co-creativity involved will have goals that go beyond those of any individual’s linguistic or intercultural competence.

A Decade and a Half of Research in Telecollaboration for Language Learning: Lessons Learnt

The field of telecollaboration for language learning (henceforth TlcLL) has been remarkable for its willingness to review its own effectiveness regularly over the decade and a half of its existence, to document failure (Ware 2005; O’Dowd and Ritter 2006; Müller-Hartmann 2007; O’Dowd 2007), and to move from the notion of ‘conflict as accidental finding of research’ to ‘conflict as object of research’ (Schneider and van der Emde 2006). Findings are mixed, with some successes and many challenges.

Claims of success have included personal and cultural benefits (Itakura 2004; Jin and Erben 2007), linguistic and sociolinguistic advances (Kötter 2003), ‘communication’ skills development (Egert 2000; Lee 2004), critical cultural awareness raising (Müller-Hartmann 2000) and teacher professional development (Arnold and Ducate 2006, Lund 2006).

Difficulties, tension and failure have been attributed to a wide range of factors. Negative grammatical-pragmatic transfer (for example copying word order from a language to another thus turning a declarative sentence into an imperative, with disruptive effect on a
conversation) has been reported by Blake and Zyzik (2003). There have been many claims of differences in communication/negotiation/interactional ‘styles’, such as different ways that Germans and Americans have of identifying a threat to face, or distinguishing between being given information and ‘being lectured at’ (Ware 2005; Ware and Kramsch 2005). Age differences are pointed to by Lee (2004). Local learning values, such as the desirability for non-Anglo-Europeans of English as a route to better jobs, contrasting with the learning goals of US partners in learning European languages (i.e. for travel or study abroad options) (Ware 2005). Institutional and professional misalignments, as when teachers are themselves ‘intercultural learners’, or when one side of the exchange is for whatever reason better prepared than their partners to integrate the telecollaboration into the core teaching, are reported in Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2003) and O’Dowd (2005). Practical constraints due to different time zones, semester dates and assessment arrangements have been signalled by many, for example Ware (2005). Psychological pressures due to synchronicity, particularly with video are documented by O’Dowd (2006 a and b). Mismatches between collaborative online activity and individually assessed outcomes are described in Greenfield (2003). Influences from the wider sociocultural context of use of technology are at the heart of Thorne’s (2003) influential concept of cultures-of-use. Teacher workload, an anecdotally well-known factor of resistance to online teaching, is not often discussed but see Rösler (2004). Last but not least incompatibilities in worldviews, for example about post-cold-war Germany, about European anti-Americanism or about what counts as ‘terrorism’ in different hotspots of the world (O’Dowd 2005; Ware and Kramsch 2005), have been found to affect the outcomes of telecollaboration projects.

Train (2006) contributed an in-depth critical account to Belz and Thorne’s (2006) milestone work on network-based collaborative learning. Reviewing the contributions to that volume, Train found that telecollaboration research needed to ask with more insistence than it had done hitherto, questions about issues such as TlcLL’s
preparedness to engage with the findings of research that has “problematicized the concept of the NS [Native Speaker] as the most salient ideology of identity and language use connected to FLE [Foreign Language Education]” (ibid: 260, our italics), or the attachment of TlcLL to the idea of working with L1 communities, which Train suggests is based on “the imagining of human communities and identities around the concept of nation-states” (ibid: 256). Even more relevantly for our current purpose, he also identifies four issues that prefigure our discussion later on in this chapter. Firstly, in questioning the extent to which TlcLL peddles a standardising version of “the native language” assuring in this respect the continuation online of traditional offline classroom-based language teaching practices (ibid: 249), he suggests that the Internet might be used for more diverse forms of linguistic and cultural learning. This links directly to a question that we will raise further down, as to whether the blurring of formal and informal experiences afforded by the Social Web can support this expectation. Secondly, we would like to further explore the implications of Train’s doubts (ibid: 257) concerning the strength of TlcLL’s commitment to discursive practices of variation and inclusion, as part of our later discussion of the politics of Learning 2.0. Thirdly, when Train questions (ibid: 268) the degree of awareness, in TlcLL, of how ‘communication’ has become something of a short-hand for language use, grounded in an idealized competence (abstracted from actual communication), we see a prefiguration of debates, to which we return below, on the continuing authority of ‘the text’ in formal learning and its role in e-learning. Finally, relevant to our discussion of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic cultures on the Social Web, is his attempt to raise awareness within the telecollaboration community of the utilitarian assumptions behind the concept of ‘communication’ which, he points out, derive their strength from one standard language, English, and from the commercial interests of the communities who speak it, in turn reinforcing the unity of the dominant cultural paradigm (ibid: 258-259).
Train’s critique focuses the TleLL community’s attention on the socio-political implications of its practices by highlighting the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion that runs through the objects of its teaching (standard languages, native linguistic models, idealised cultures). This dichotomy has not so far been mainstreamed within its debates in such a way that it has acquired sufficient momentum to prompt changes. Further, there has been no reconsideration of the continuing commitment to engage in telecollaboration, in spite of insightful criticisms of basic assumptions. And, until this volume, there has not been an articulation of what pedagogical benefits the TleLL community might expect to gain from Web 2.0. The aim of this chapter is to open up these questions. At this point, a helpful analysis may come from a view based on a wider historical understanding of the institutional contexts framing language learning and teaching.

A general working distinction can be made between three levels of institutional contexts. At the micro-level, what is meant by ‘the institution’ is ‘the classroom and its habitual practices.’ At the meso-level, the school, college or university is the institutional context. At the macro-level, the institutional frame is understood as that which is provided by a national entity (e.g. a State in the USA) or a supranational one (e.g. the Council of Europe) as well as by national or educational supranational policies.

The research reported above has looked at micro-level and meso-level institutional factors impinging on TleLL. But it is the macro-level that the TleLL literature - with the exception of Thorne (2006) and Schneider and van der Emde (2006) - have remained shy of exploring. We therefore pick up the macro-level institutional thread in the next sections.

Interculturalism
The association of ‘intercultural education’ with communication between national entities and between groups speaking different ‘national languages’ is prevalent in many academic communities (Piller 2007) and in particular in those concerned with language teaching (Starkey 2007). This association can be illuminated by reference to the recent histories of European and North-American educational thinking. In the introduction to a 2007 report on intercultural education prepared for the French National Institute for Educational Research ¹, Meunier (2007) describes “intercultural education”, or “diversity”, as “differences in identity, culture or religion necessitating the ability to understand others, and to communicate and collaborate with others. Without this ability, conflicts, violence and violation of human rights are likely” (n.p. our translation²). In this formulation, interculturalism is understood as anti-racism, social equity and citizenship education. These are social aims that currently drive the intercultural education policies and not trans-national harmony, for which purpose intercultural education was first promoted by the Council of Europe in the 1970s in order to support peace amongst the countries of a continent still traumatised by war. But in the pacified Europe of the 1990s, new intercultural policies appeared on the agendas of European educational institutions, arising from other dimensions of that continent’s post-war history, namely decommitment from colonialism and the consequences on migration flows out of the former colonies and into the countries of Western Europe. The Europeans’ continuing interculturalist ideologies in the last decades of the 20th century were shaped by the resulting reconfigurations of their communities, rather than by concerns about cross-border friendship, although the latter is what has remained the main focus of culture teaching in the ‘foreign-language’ teaching world.

¹ Institut National de la Recherche Pédagogique <http://www.inrp.fr>
² “différences identitaires, culturelles et religieuses [qui] nécessitent des capacités de compréhension, de communication et de coopération mutuelles […] sous peine de dégénérer sous forme de conflits, de violences et d’atteintes aux droits de l’homme”
In North America in contrast, neither war (until 9/11) nor immigration flows (in spite of the size of the Spanish-speaking community) have featured much in the discourse of language policymakers. Language teaching professionals have been trying to organise their associations into a fight against the ‘deplorable’ (Byrnes 2008) policy vacuum in which they have been left by the fragmentation of administrative responsibilities between states and the federal level, and by the indifference of the US government to language education outside the national security focus. Such educational policies have been criticized as counter-productive, for example the No Child Left Behind legislation (Blake and Kramsch 2007), or as divisive, such as the National Security Language Initiative, diverting resource to programs that teach languages on the US government’s ‘critical needs’ list, i.e. Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi, Farsi and a few others. As a consequence, North-American academic voices have been heard expressing a need to imitate European institutions like the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz (Byrnes 2008) or the Common European Framework of Reference<sup>3</sup> (Schneider and van der Emde 2006; Thorne 2006; Train 2006). However, the reasons why Europeans have historically come to interculturalism, and the reasons why North-Americans might want to follow suit, have not been the subject of much analysis.

Two contrasting examples will illustrate not only how different macro-level backgrounds influence the way that ‘intercultural’ is understood, but also how each ‘background’ is in itself difficult to apprehend as a single coherent entity, since it embodies complex historical influences and is created in overlapping discourses.

The first example concerns a study of an online exchange between students at Vassar College in the USA and Münster University in Germany. In this project, Schneider and van der Emde (2006) set out to combine “the important work on intercultural learning being conducted in Europe [with] the conceptual tools that researchers and teachers in the United States have for conducting

and assessing intercultural communication” (p. 180). To marry the two approaches, they use a ‘dialogic’ model of communication designed to counter the depoliticisation of discussion activities that they see as an undesirable by-product of communicative language teaching. They explain that like the model of intercultural learning:

dialogic approaches to interaction call for materials, experiences and encounters that de-center students from their own culture’s worldviews and require them to critically evaluate perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures through interpretation. These goals are at once practical and political, but also intellectual. (p. 183) The resulting ‘conflicts in cyberspace’ of the Vassar-Münster exchange were, we are told, ultimately turned into valuable insights by the students.

This study may be an example of designers successfully engaging with the micro-level (e.g. the management of classroom disturbances caused by emotional charge in the content) or with the meso-level (e.g. groups of only 11 and 14 participants, at two top universities), or both. But how were the authors’ intentions concerning the macro-level translated into research? Did the chosen teaching methodology actually represent a marrying of ‘North-American conceptual tools’ with the conceptual tools of the Common European Framework of Reference? If so, did the participants derive a learning advantage from this mixed approach? Unfortunately, the study’s research design does not permit the identification of a relationship between learning benefits and macro-level conditions, since the authors offer no way of differentiating between the two types of ‘conceptual tools’ involved.

That the criticisms mentioned above can be levelled at researchers who – almost uniquely – have taken care to concern themselves with the ideologies within which they work, is an indication that, in general, ideologies are more troublesome than telecollaboration research has given them credit for, and that they should not be looked upon as the providers of ‘tools’ but as the sources of discourses whose inflections shape the discourses of all
individuals involved (teachers, learners, researchers and readers of research).

The second example comes from the 2007 special issue of *Language and Intercultural Communication*, where a model of intercultural learning design is offered from within the field of intercultural business communication. In her article in that issue, Rathje (2007) reflects a dynamic interpretation of intercultural interaction which sees cultural encounters as causing ‘disturbances’ which individuals or groups seek to replace with ‘normality’, before the next disturbance comes along, and so on iteratively. International differences, whilst not discounted, are no more significant than those ‘foreign’ experiences, subcultures, organisational cultures and various cultural strata [that exist] within a presumably uniform national culture” (ibid: 260). Interculturalism is thus relocated within what Rathje and others have called an ‘inter-collective’ model of interaction. Educators working with such a model would prioritise the process of repeated adaptation to disturbance, eliminating the need to make “claims about success or failure [of intercultural competence] in terms of the pre-set goals as they are instead dependent on multiple external conditions such as expertise, strategic competence, situational or power factors” (ibid: 264). In this way, the debates about what to teach in intercultural classes have lost their relevance. This model has features that render it compatible with the anti-essentialist positions expressed elsewhere, for example by Piller (2007), who rejects a usage of the term ‘culture’ “as more or less co-terminous with ‘nation’ and/or ‘ethnicity’” (p. 210), or Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) who argue that cultural identity has many more dimensions than nationality and mother tongue, and by Scollon and Scollon (2001), denouncing “the fallacy of opposing two large cultural groups on the basis of some single dimension” (p. 155) given that “almost all forms of discourse take place at the intersections of several discourse systems” (p. 248). Nevertheless, congruent with its institutional origins in business cultures, Rathje’s model can easily be interpreted as expressing a worldview that ultimately prioritises the management of chaos and protecting of order over the establishing
and maintenance of social justice. In other words what seems, superficially, to derive from the discourse of tolerance of diversity, rooted in an attachment to the notion of identity as multiple and fluid that characterises certain local educational perspectives (e.g. European citizenship frameworks), takes on a different (global, utilitarian) overtone when the macro-level discourse is taken into account.

These diverging examples show, as Piller (2007) points out, that “we do not have culture but that we construct culture discursively” (p. 211). If that is the case, then we should heed the consequence, which is that the very discourse of intercultural debates functions as a discursive construction and can “serve to obscure inequality between and within groups” (p. 210). For example, we might ask how talk of ‘developing’ competence (Byram, Nichols and Stevens 2001) and the rhetoric of ‘mis’ alluded to earlier (miscommunication, misunderstanding, misalignment, etc.) construct our understanding of what happens during any meeting of two or more people, strangers or associates, online or off, formally educational or not. We would, therefore, like to suggest that the TlcLL community should set for itself, as a goal, to deconstruct its ‘intercultural’ practices and to create an ‘inter-collective model’ with, to put it colloquially, a social conscience. Whether the Social Web could be of assistance in this undertaking is a question that we return to shortly.

Communicative Competence

Online language learning researchers have been concerned to attribute the tensions encountered during transnational projects to national differences in “communicative strategies” (Biesenbach-Lucas 2005) or in “conversational styles” (Belz 2003), rather than to linguistic breakdowns. We can agree with these authors that our everyday experience of interacting with members of a different
national group commonly results in an anecdotal perception that ‘they’ have different ways of asking/joking/negotiating etc., nevertheless for us the concept of interactional norms (as represented by phrases like “communicative strategy” and “conversational style”) is problematic when used to explain the way that particular nationalities communicate. Block and Cameron’s (2002) analysis of ideologies of “communicative competence” and these ideologies’ association with the utilitarian objectives of English language teaching for global business contexts has been well-rehearsed. So has Block’s (2002) critique of the language teaching community’s devotion to negotiation of meaning through ‘communicative’ tasks which, consistent with their history above, can as Block says only reflect “a partial view of communication and one that is not powerful enough to capture much of what language acquisition is about” (p. 124).

Seen from an institutional macro-level, then, communicative language teaching (CLT) is positioned as a practice that is, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, oriented towards the material success of individuals with goals tied into Western capitalism, i.e. one specific, contested, economic model. CLT has also been criticised, notably by Magnan (2008), for its inauthenticity. Authenticity has usually been talked about as a quality that is desirable in tasks and in materials. An authentic task, or an authentic text, has in that sense been understood to be one which approximates, in the formal learning setting such as the classroom, a task or a text that you might encounter outside it. This is a meso-level understanding of authenticity, which Magnan calls, instead, inauthenticity. As she sees it, regardless of the quality of a conversational stimulus, its impact is limited because “instructed conversations in US classrooms and the meanings they generate remain essentially American although the words are foreign” (ibid: 358). Magnan’s concept of authenticity sits at the macro-level, where the world of formal education intersects with ‘the wider world’. For her, creating an authentic discourse frame for learners means adding the wider community to the classroom community within a new framework that “re-conceive[s] foreign
language education around [out-of-classroom] social influences as well as for social objectives” (ibid). Service learning and study abroad are two routes, Magnan suggests, via which this could be achieved.

Organisationally difficult in the face-to-face world, these objectives become feasible in the online situations afforded by both the ‘basic’ web and the Social Web. However, the role of Web 2.0 needs to be scrutinised, as Mangenot and Penilla’s (2009) investigations show. These authors remind us that authenticity (use of non-didacticised materials) is not the same as plausibility (learner perception of the adequation of the task with ‘reality’). They argue that the difference between the two is sharper in Web 2.0. In a case study they report how students of French in Australia were set a task with the canonical structure “auto-presentation followed by resource-mining on the Internet, followed by collaborative product creation”.

They found that only the first phase (auto-presentation) generated real enthusiasm. The other two tasks were effected with minimal engagement. Learners, they explain, will invent workarounds suited to their own needs “unless the task takes into account reality in all its forms (adequation between the situation/setting/humans involved and the environment, particularly the social and networked environment” (ibid: 89, our translation). For these Australia-based students, introducing themselves to each other online was an activity in full adequation with their normal social practices and with the tool (blog) they used to carry them out, while creating a product together, using items found on the Internet was not, whatever is popularly assumed about that generation’s enthusiasm for the Social Web. In a second case study, Mangenot et al. describe an experience in which Japan-based learners of French in their pre-year-abroad period were set a similarly structured task, the product of which was that they should agree on a French city in which to spend their time abroad. The students all completed the task, some even creating an improved

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4 “[L]orsque la tâche ne prend pas en charge le réel et ses modalités (inadéquation de la situation, du décor ou des acteurs à l’environnement, notamment social et cybernétique), ce sont les apprenants eux-mêmes qui en impriment la marque, selon leurs besoins”.
variant. This success is attributed to the close adequation of the task
to life outside the classroom (it could be seen as a rehearsal for the
students’ real research a year later), to the social setting (discussing
their choice in twosomes and threesomes was plausible, in that they
might well do this with friends when faced with the ‘real’ choice a
year later) and to the technology (involving the same technology
which they would use to do this research).

To preserve the authenticity (in Magnan’s sense) and plausibility
(in Mangenot and Penilla’s) of the experience, and to promote the
free interaction of diverse individuals (away from the temptation of
corralling them into national groups) learners have to be emancipated
from the virtual classroom. As Thorne (2008) has shown, the
conditions that are necessary for effective (language) learning can be
met in non-institutional learning online so there is no in-principle
pedagogical objection to the TlcLL community making use of the
Social Web.

The ‘Collaborative’ in ‘Telecollaborative’

If collaborative learning is to be successful, certain institutional as
well as personal criteria (pertaining to both teachers and students)
must be met. For example, student autonomy (both individual and
group autonomy) is a necessary ingredient and must be present in the
participating cohorts or a space must be created within which it can
develop. Group autonomy further resolves, as Mangenot and Nissen
(2006) point out, into “the capacity of a group to manage itself on
three levels: a socio-affective level (getting along with others), a
sociocognitive level (resolving problems together), and an
organizational level (planning, monitoring, and evaluating work)” (p.
604). Crucially, these authors caution that a collaborative course
design does not guarantee collaboration. Investigating an online
course, they found that while the guidelines of the course “insist[ed]
on the necessity of interaction between students: discussing their interpretation of the documents, exchanging their ideas for the essay outline, and checking coherence between drafts … there was little negotiation of meaning” (p. 619). They attributed this to the fact that the tutor was not allocated enough time to monitor the group, which hampered the students in the development of collaborative skills at a sociocognitive level. Time allocated to the tutor is, in turn, an institutional factor, driven by the value placed on individual assessment. Such a value system is analysable at the meso-level but also reflects the wider, macro-level educational and economic priorities of societies that reward individual achievement at the expense of work done collaboratively. The chances of TlcLL 2.0 faring better, in generating real collaboration, than early TlcLL has done, is a question which we should not attempt to answer without careful consideration of the real temporal and cultural constraints of co-creation on Web 2.0 that are being highlighted by Social Web researchers such as Hargittai and Walejko (2008).

The Missing Link: a Conceptualisation of Culture Online

If as we have argued, the field of TlcLL suffers from an underconceptualisation of ‘intercultural’, a misunderstanding over ‘communicative competence’ and a misplaced confidence in the reality of ‘collaborative learning’, what are we proposing as an alternative way of thinking through these obstacles? In 2007, we asked a group of e-learning researchers, in language learning and outside, to consider what kinds of cultural phenomena could be observed in transnational online educational encounters (Goodfellow and Lamy 2009). Through their accounts, a fresh view can be taken of the notions of ‘intercultural’, ‘communication’, ‘collaboration’ and online learning.
The contributors to Goodfellow et al (2009) have reconceptualised issues of culture in online learning to distinguish between three ways of looking at what is at stake: one is to focus on the habits and preferences that individuals bring to online learning that are attributable to their socialisation into specific national, ethnic, religious or other communities; the second is to examine the norms and values associated with online learning in specific institutional contexts; and the third is to seek emergent, informal, innovative, collective approaches to learning in conditions which are characterised by new forms of communication. It is the last of these concepts that is overtly signalled in this discussion of the Social Web in telecollaborative language learning, but we would argue that it cannot be considered as entirely separate from the others, or as superseding them, since identities and ideologies are at stake, as well as learning. Cultures of learning that are rooted in the ideologies of traditional educational thinking, far from being obsolete and irrelevant to the digital age, are already deeply imbricated in virtual contexts of practice, as witness the persistence of genres of linguistic knowledge construction based on the authorial voice, which can be heard just as clearly in the assertive register of some news bloggers, or the multiply-constructed texts of a wiki, as it can in the traditional textbook. Conventional, and Western/Anglo, socio-technical paradigms of thought permeate the Social Web and Learning 2.0 as much as they did previous generations of educational technology, and are no less ideologically and linguistically hegemonic.

The Social Web: Practices, Ideologies and Disruptive Technologies
The signature practices of social web environments for educationists are blogging (now also including microblogging, e.g. Twitter7), wikis, and social networking through friendship sites such as Facebook. These are the areas where much learning-related interest is currently focused, and whilst there are other social web practices that have clear applications to learning, such as the use of resource-sharing applications like Google Docs or YouTube, these tend to be viewed as either less appealing to young students today or else less potentially collaborative. From the perspective of educationists who have an interest in language, either as a medium or as an outcome of learning, blogging, wikis and social networking also implicate language as social practice in obvious and interesting ways. As Warschauer and Grimes (2007) observe, the “sharp give and take” of the blogosphere, the “community standards” of wikis, and the blurring of “boundaries between language and other signs” that occurs in social networking sites point to a reshaping of the concepts of authorship, audience, and artifact (p.1) that cannot but have implications for our view of these practices as literacy.

The marriage of communication practices that have popular appeal with the educational ideal of collaborative learning lies at the heart of the contemporary agenda of pedagogical innovation through social web technologies. Seely Brown and Adler's 2008 “demand-pull” model of an educational process that is driven by learners seeking to engage with online communities of practitioners, for example, is illustrated by the way that contributors to Wikipedia who are ‘trusted’ graduate to become administrators. A similar vision put forward in the UK Open University’s Social:Learn6 project is of large scale social web effects such as the ‘power of the crowd’ harnessed to collaborative structures that are able to provide formal community recognition of learning activity (Walton, Weller and Conole 2008: 3).

5 See <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1902604,00.html>
6 <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/sociallearn/about/>
7 See <http://news.cnet.com/8301-13641_3-10169120-44.html> for more on 'power of the crowd'.
Collaboration has been at the centre of the online learning project for more than two decades now (and implicated in 'progressive' educational practice for considerably longer than that), and its apparent promises of the delivery of learning outcomes finely tuned to the requirements of workplaces in the 'knowledge economy', together with a more democratic relationship between teacher and taught, has ensured its appeal to instrumental and idealistic pedagogues alike. User demand, or the power of the crowd, on the other hand, is a new cuckoo deposited in the educational nest by the forces of commoditisation and competition in the learning 'market', reinforced by 'new learner' discourses that characterise education's future consumers in terms of their engagement in predominantly technological forms of cultural production (see, for example, Lemke and van Helden 2009).

What millions choose to do online, individually and in informal communities, the 'goods' they produce and the services they demand, are increasingly being seen by educational institutions as having implications for their survival as businesses in the digital age. Sharp lessons are being learned from what has happened to other cultural industries, such as the music business or the book trade, where customer volume can now only be achieved through continuous product diversification (a phenomenon now known as 'the long tail', following Anderson 2004). These lessons are being closely identified with the ways that institutions use the new generations of technologies and technical infrastructures (see, for example, Katz's 2008 model of the 'consumerised' university in the era of 'cloud computing').

Walton et al. and other proponents of Learning 2.0 (e.g. Downes 2005; Cobb 2007) argue that the Social Web is not simply a new teaching tool, but is both a necessary disruption to what has become a dysfunctional higher education system, and a means of renewing and sustaining that system through what they call a 'seismic shift' in both pedagogical and business practice. If social web practices that are engaging millions in the informal domains of cultural production can be allied to what educational institutions are prepared to
Telecollaboration and Learning 2.0

legitimise as learning, then these practices can generate increased levels of cultural capital for individuals, at the same time as they enable institutions to meet political and social priorities for widened access to formal education and economic priorities for survival as businesses in a competitive industry. This analysis points to a need to 'break down the barriers between formal and informal education' in order to ensure openness and increased participation and address the challenges of cultural diversity (Walton, Weller and Conole 2008).

The notion of the ‘disruptive’ role of technology and its capacity to transform educational practice is a familiar one from earlier generations of learning technology, specifically the idea that computer-mediated communication will lead to a breaking down of the transmission approach to teaching, with consequent implications for the authority of the teacher, the institution, and the hierarchical structures of the education system in general. The concept of the informal online learning community in particular has played its part in the envisioning of the end of formal education. Goodfellow (2005), for example, relates some of these perspectives to the ‘de-schooling’ movement of the 1960s and to the more recent emergence of non-institutional online practitioner-learning communities, especially around information technology and other media interest groups. However, whilst the desirability of a strong synergy between formal and informal learning is evident, in practice the opportunities for informal learning that are offered by engagement in online environments have often been seen as a threat, rather than a complement, to formal learning. In some cases the values of the formal and informal domain have been seen as actively in conflict (see Lankshear and Knobel’s critiques of school use of digital technology 2003, or Lemke and van Helden’s contrasting modes of engagement in schools and fan communities 2009). The opening up of the Social Web as a space into which to extend the practices of formal learning is therefore a project which has an ideological as well as a pedagogical, and business, dimension.

Perhaps the key way in which the ideology that underpins contemporary discourses of the Social Web and Learning 2.0 is likely
to impact on the ideals and practices of TlcLL is through the reproduction of an essentially individualistic and contingent approach to the building of community online. Although Web2.0 technologies are characterised as opening up access and new opportunities for content generation and communication to users who had previously been passive consumers, what Beer and Burrows (2007) refer to as “a new rhetoric of ‘democratisation’” (para. 3.1), the “epic scale” (Walton, Weller and Conole 2008) of knowledge construction that flows from millions of hits, edits, or rankings, may in fact mitigate against the kind of identification with knowledge communities that collaborative learning has always sought to promote. The remaking of both real-world and virtual communities as multiply-connected personal social networks, (Wellman et al. 2003), is the project of a more self-focused and attention-seeking kind of online activity.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) identify three key affordances that online social networking environments (such as Facebook and MySpace) provide: the construction of public or semi-public profiles, the articulation of lists of other users with whom a connection is shared, and the viewing and traversing of connections made by oneself and by others within the system. Social networking sites are used to sustain mini communities of users, whose participation, whilst it might vary in proactivity and intensity, is thought to confer a sense of group membership and other forms of social capital such as increases in self-esteem or access to useful information resources (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007). Boyd and Ellison (2007) also point to key differences in the focus of social networking sites, compared to that of the online communities that characterise Web 1.0. Mainly they argue that such sites are organised around people rather than topics of interest, and are structured as personal (or ‘egocentric’) networks, with the user at the centre of their own community. This view develops from Wellman et al.’s (2003) concept of “networked individualism”: personal communities that “supply the essentials of community separately to each individual: support, sociability, information, social identities, and a sense of belonging” (The Rise of Networked Individualism, para 6). The person, rather
than the household or group, is the primary unit of connectivity. Knobel's account of her own Facebook activity and that of a close colleague (Knobel and Lankshear 2008), for example, clearly demonstrate how her communications in this medium start from, and revolve around, who she is, what she likes, who she knows, where she goes, etc. The people with whom she exchanges messages and other kinds of digital 'goods' and 'gifts' in Facebook, are people who have elected to engage with her, either out of pre-existing affinities in the 'actual' worlds of business and friendship, or via acquired affinities developed within the virtual world itself. The centrality of the 'owner' of a Facebook page to the social network within which that page is a node, and the close connection that social networks have with the geographically bounded communities that their participants inhabit (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007) raises questions about the relation of this kind of networking to TlcLL, not least the question whether an absence of geographically bounded community in online foreign language learning would permit a social network to sustain.

Web 2.0 and Critical Literacies

The promotion of the Social Web as an environment for learning goes hand in hand with the construction of students as 'net generation', 'digital native' or 'new millennial' learners (Prensky 2001, Oblinger 2003, Oblinger and Oblinger 2005), and their communication practices as new digital literacies (Martin and Madigan 2006; Lankshear and Knobel 2008). However, digital literacies discourse in educational contexts, despite its genesis in the multiliteracies movement and professed commitment to a sociocultural view of literacy (New London Group 1996), often shows a tendency to focus on operational dimensions of new communication practices, at the expense of cultural or critical ones.
This focus concentrates on students’ skills and competences and assumes an alignment of these with learner empowerment or transformation (e.g. Martin and Grudziecki 2007), paying insufficient attention to the social or institutional context which demands and rewards these skills and competences and is also involved in shaping any transformation.

Recent research focusing on learners and their practices, for example, suggests that learners’ engagement with new communication practices in formal and informal learning is complex, influenced by institutional factors, and not uniform in its impact on learning for people from different social and cultural backgrounds (Bennet, Maton and Kervin 2008; Hargittai and Walejko 2008). Findings from recent research in the UK illustrate some of the complexities: Ivanic et al. (2007), for example, claim that students who appear to have low levels of literacy competence in educational settings can be highly literate in their work, domestic, community and leisure activities, many of which involve digital practices. They raise the question how the more successful practices of the informal setting can usefully be incorporated into formal learning. Jones and Lea (2008), on the other hand, suggest that students are resistant to moves aimed at harnessing their digital practices too closely to the formal context of university learning, and show a lack of willingness to blur the boundaries between the personal and curricular spheres in their learning. Apparent contradictions such as these highlight a need to problematise the concept of literacy in relation to new and conventional communication practices in teaching and learning. Too close an association of literacy with the tools and technologies that are employed for communication obscures the social action that underpins the learning and technological contexts. If, in focusing on the practices of telecollaboration using the Social Web, we do not pay attention to how these practices relate to those of the institutions which will accredit them as evidence of language learning, we will fail to engage learners with the more powerful of the forms of cultural capital available to them.
A critical understanding of literacy as social and cultural action is important at a time of major challenge to the traditional discipline-based social relations of university education (Goodfellow and Lea 2007), and is of particular importance for Telecollaboration and Learning 2.0 where the ‘intercultural’ context of action is itself under challenge. Critical literacy is regarded, from a multiliteracies perspective, as an ability, in students, to evaluate, critique and redesign the resources through which practices and discourses are mediated. Theorists such as Kellner and Share (2007) have pointed to the kinds of ideological representation in contemporary media (e.g. of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.) that students need to be able to challenge. This kind of competence is clearly desirable in a telecollaborative context where linguistic resources may be limited. However, the orientation to critical literacy that we put forward here focuses on ourselves as designers and teachers in these contexts. This follows the work of scholars in the field of new literacy studies who have shifted the focus away from the ‘literateness’ of individuals towards the ‘literacies’ that belong to specific communities (Street 1995; Gee 1996; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič 2000). A question such as how the values embedded in social media practices sit within existing academic practice, for example, (Hemmi, Bayne and Land 2008; Jones and Lea 2008) is not just about what this form of communication can be used for in teaching and learning, but about whose practice is to be valued, for example through assessment or publication. This focus has underpinned research that explores the way that texts that are involved in teaching and learning in digital contexts and explores the role of teachers and institutions in framing textual practices so that they serve dominant cultural purposes (Goodfellow and Lea 2007). Digital social media practices, compared to essayist writing, entail more volatile (that is, fragmented, changing, multivoiced) forms of textual mediation and subject formation associated with collaborative modes of enquiry and group self-regulation (Hemmi, Bayne and Land 2008). Whilst this might fit with the contemporary curriculum focus on knowledge construction, these media also promote fragmentation over
cohesion, exploration over exposition, and ‘rapid patterns of amendment, truncation, revision and addition’ (ibid: 30). These characteristics are at odds with the formal, high-status literacy practices of the academy, with its traditions of critical reflection, argumentation, and reference to authority and the authoritative. A critical literacy stance on the power relations underlying both formal and informal practice in social web environments is required, first of all, from the practitioners of social web approaches to education themselves, in order that contradictions arising from the collision of institutional cultures of learning with self-generating online learning cultures can be identified and made manageable. Warnick’s (2002) distinction between epideictic and deliberative communication makes this point well. Epideictic communication celebrates consensually-held values (social networking practices and the ‘power of the crowd’) and deliberative communication critically examines issues (traditional academic knowledge construction). The question for practitioners of telecollaborative language learning who are engaged with Web 2.0 is whether it is possible to develop pedagogies which are geared to both the exploitation of epideictic communication for the purposes of language acquisition, and also the deliberative critique of the cultural nature of such communication itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter, using a wide cultural-historical lens, we aimed to cast a critical light on what we see as assumptions underpinning the work of the telecollaboration community, in order to open up ways of thinking through the role of telecollaboration in language learning in the new settings offered by the Social Web, or Web 2.0. In their introduction, the editors of this volume argue that ‘it's not just the tools' that mark the difference between the two 'eras' of Web-based
telecollaboration, 1.0 and 2.0, it's also the nature of the ‘literacies’ (i.e. skills and competences) required for individuals in the virtual classroom to make use of them. A similar position is expressed by the editors of a recent volume on a similar topic (Lomicka and Lord 2009: 6). Whilst we agree that 'it's not just the tools', we think it is necessary to go further than looking only at individual competences or behaviours, and reconceptualise the literacies of telecollaboration 2.0 as the product of the struggles, disruptions and transformations that educational institutions are engaged in as they attempt to assimilate collective behaviours and intelligences emerging through the growing use of the Social Web.

We have scrutinised the three components of the culture of telecollaboration (interculturalism, communication and collaboration), and found them equally as problematic whether discussed in the light of Web 1.0 or in Web 2.0. The priority now, we have suggested, is to shift away from a limiting view of telecollaboration as purely pedagogical practice, and instead to cast it as an educational culture and, as such, subject to the type of critique that other educational cultures have received. Such a critique involves asking historically-informed questions about whose interests the practice might serve and how its hidden power relations might be deconstructed and understood, in the era that is being called Learning 2.0.

References


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