

Book Review – Online Communication in Language Learning and Teaching and Telecollaborative Language Learning

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Book Review

Online Communication in Language Learning and Teaching and Telecollaborative Language Learning

Authors: Marie-Noëlle Lamy and Regine Hampel (2007). *Online Communication in Language Learning and Teaching*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-0230-00127-5

Editor: Melinda Dooly (2008). *Telecollaborative Language Learning*. Bern: Peter Lang Publishing Group. ISBN 978-3-03911-523-5

Reviewer: Nataly Tcherepashenets, State University of New York, Empire State College

As an area coordinator for online foreign languages courses, I am constantly seeking efficient, innovative strategies for teaching languages and cultures, which in my mind are closely connected to the task of increasing students' multicultural awareness. I was delighted to find that Marie-Noëlle Lamy and Regine Hampel, British scholars and practitioners of distance learning and the authors of *Online Communication in Language Learning and Teaching* and, especially, Melinda Dooly, the Spanish-based teacher trainer and researcher and the editor of *Telecollaborative Language Learning*, share this vision. Both books focus on the communication aspects of language learning/teaching from two complementary perspectives and relate the development of communication skills to the fostering of intercultural competence.

Lamy and Hampel are interested in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and have chosen to discuss it in the context of language learning (CMCL). Dooly et al. produced their work as a "guidebook moderating intercultural collaboration online" based on an innovative project they conducted.

Online Communication is divided into four parts: Key Concepts and Issues, Research and Practice, Practitioner Research, and Resources. Each chapter in the first part (chapters 1-7) begins with the exploration of concepts in relation to computer-mediated communication (CMC) and gradually narrows its focus to language learning. This strategy makes the book of interest to both readers who teach languages and to beginning researchers in CMC across disciplines. At the end of each chapter, there is a summary and lists of recommended texts in both the field of CMCL and in related areas. The dual reading lists perceptively emphasize the intrinsically interdisciplinary nature of CMC research.

Chapter 1 offers an historical overview of the emergence and development of CMCL and delineates current research needs in such areas as assessment and teaching delivery. The authors also point out the emergence of a new content area for research, intercultural theory, which is particularly relevant in the context of foreign language learning.

In chapter 2, the authors compare and contrast two theoretical frameworks, which have shaped research in second language acquisition: cognitive and socio-cultural theories. They suggest that socio-cultural theory, which stresses social interaction for learning, has the dominant influence on intercultural theory and on the most recent studies in CMCL in general.

In chapter 3, some of the key concepts of socio-cultural theory, such as mediation, multimodality, and multiliteracies, are discussed in relation to such issues as collaborative learning, production and transformation of knowledge, and learners' motivation and anxiety.

The authors observe that research in CMCL is oscillating between two poles of quantitative and qualitative research, and they outline two major directions of inquiry in chapter 4. First, there is comparative research, which can be approached from either a quantitative or qualitative point of view. Second, there are two related but distinct methodologies: discourse analysis and conversational analysis. The authors criticize the comparative approach for its inaccuracy in comparing CMCL with face-to-face experience. The difficulty and unreliability of comparative research, in their opinion, is due to the fact that in both face-to-face and virtual classrooms the same learners rarely talk about the same topics for the same reason. One may not necessarily agree with this observation because goals and even syllabi for online and face-to-face language classes are usually similar; therefore, outcomes might be comparable.

Further, in spite of the critique, the authors occasionally engage in comparative analysis, as, for instance, when they move on to a discussion of identity research, which deals with one of the most debated notions in face-to-face learning theory. Adopting Jay Lemke's definition of identity as "performance," Lamy and Hampel point out an emergent interest in identity formation, expression, and development in the virtual environment as well as in the much debated link between identity and "interculturalism" in CMCL. They observe that research findings are not unanimous in identifying such features as increased tolerance for otherness or "weaker cultural barriers in operation" in distance-learning environments, and they emphasize the importance of further research on "the ecology of online learning" and especially on the sites of learners' (inter)cultural development in a virtual foreign language classroom.

Chapter 5 covers pedagogical issues. The authors focus on the roles and skills that are needed by a competent online instructor. They stress the importance of encouraging online group bonding, especially important in language learning where the emphasis is communication. They advocate teaching online through collaboration. They share a vision of the instructor as a facilitator, and they also advocate the autonomy of the learner. According to Lamy and Hampel, the language research community has not been well-represented in the whole field of practice and research that has developed around the term *computer-supported collaborative learning* (CSCL).

Whereas in chapter 5 the authors mainly discuss teaching through a collaborative and task-based approach, the focus of chapter 6 is on learners. They point out the benefits and the inhibitory effects of CMCL on a learner's experience, giving most attention to such factors as participation, anxiety, motivation, learner control, and autonomy.

Chapter 7 addresses the question of assessment of CMCL. The authors provide a useful critical overview of current studies, and they identify further research needs in such areas as assessment of intercultural learning, feedback and error correction policies, criterion specification, silent participation, self- and peer assessment, and e-literacy.

Part 2 (chapters 8-13) aims to bridge research and practice. After pointing out a mutually enriching relationship between theory and practice, the authors note that sometimes practice invites a broader theoretical base, as, for example, in research on international telecollaborative projects that in addition to the familiar issues of language learning has opened up psychological and semiotic considerations of identity and meaning-making online.

In order to address questions of formation of identity and meaning-making online, in chapters 8 through 12, the authors introduce two complementary perspectives on technological tools, represented through the lenses of two specific studies. These tools include asynchronous fora, synchronous chat, multiple object-oriented environments, audiographic environments and virtual worlds, and video conferencing, as well as blogs, wikis, and mobile devices.

Structured differently, chapter 13 presents an overview of such emerging technologies as blogs, wikis, and mobile devices, illustrating some possibilities for specific applications in the context of foreign language learning. The authors emphasize that both institutional and cultural factors play a role in the successful use of these technologies in virtual classrooms.

Part 3 (chapters 14-17), entitled Practitioner Research, is, as expected, addressed to those who are interested in carrying out research with their students. The authors suggest that three organizing principles, i.e., reviewing practice, designing and implementing action, and evaluating and possibly disseminating findings, lie at the base of such research. They provide convincing examples of how these principles have been used. Finally, they offer a brief overview of methods and instruments that can be complemented by reference to online resources that are the focus of chapter 18. In addition to providing useful sources, the authors outline possible practitioner research projects.

Dooly's guidebook, *Telecollaborative Language Learning*, exemplifies an observation that empirical findings enrich research as much as research applications can be beneficial for practice. Contributors to this volume offer insightful reflections on aspects of online language pedagogy derived from a specific experience of participation in the international telecollaborative language learning project entitled Moderating Intercultural Collaboration and Language Learning. I was delighted to discover that, as the title of the project indicates, the authors explicitly relate language learning to the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

The assumption behind this project, and that informs the present study, is that group diversity can contribute positively to the learning process. The authors suggest that cultural dimensions of the learning process can have a crucial influence on the outcomes. They may be highlighted or even become a point of conflict when collaborative learning involves culturally different learners. The authors of chapter 1 introduce the concept of intercultural communicative competence. Most theories agree that it consists of intercultural sensitivity (willingness to respect and accept differences and similarities), intercultural awareness (understanding of cultural conventions that affect thinking and behavior), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral aspect, development of skills needed to act effectively in situations that involve intercultural interactions).

The authors of chapter 2 introduce helpful tips for teaching ICC, which in their opinion can be developed through at least five different models: (1) the cognitive model, where the emphasis is on intellectual understanding of a culture; (2) the self-awareness model, where the emphasis is on raising awareness and on identifying the attitudes and opinions embedded in students' own culture (cultural values); (3) the cultural awareness model, which aims at getting students to recognize and better understand aspects of culture that are universal and others that are specific to certain cultures; (4) the simulation model, which places students in a simulated cultural environment so they might learn to adopt new habits and attitudes towards the target culture; and (5) the interaction model (immersion model).

Chapter 3 presents tools that help to facilitate collaborative learning and the integration of multiculturalism in the foreign language virtual classroom. I especially liked the discussion of blogs as a collaborative tool because they are usually considered to be useful for more individualized projects, such as a reflective journal or as a type of portfolio. This chapter ends with reference to specific helpful ideas for efficient teaching with blogs, wikis, and webquests.

Instructors as well as students benefit from collaborative learning. The authors of chapter 4 focus on teacher education and suggest that collaborative learning projects in an educational portal, comprising such resources and services as e-mail, forums, and search engines, can allow teachers and students to design their own "virtual content."

In her concluding chapter, Dooly highlights the development of intercultural awareness and the main elements of effective online peer collaboration for the purpose of foreign language acquisition. This chapter contains useful tips for assessment strategies that students can apply to their own and to their peers' work. The book ends with an idea bank in three major areas: "getting started," "implementing your project," and "ideas about assessing." Some specific suggestions are valuable for future developers of collaborative projects as well as for practitioners and researchers who are looking for innovative ways to infuse multicultural competence in a virtual language classroom.

In summary, students and beginning researchers who are interested in computer-mediated communication and those who approach this field from the perspective of foreign language acquisition will benefit from the theoretical discussions, the outlines of current research needs,

and the practical observations that the authors of *Online Communications in Language Learning and Teaching* offer. More seasoned practitioners and researchers, especially those puzzled by the task of integrating multiculturalism in a foreign language virtual classroom, will find *Telecollaborative Language Learning* to be a good companion, full of creative and fresh ideas.

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