

Chapter 17

European Dialogue Project: Collaborating to Improve on the Quality of Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Telecollaborating and communicating in online contexts using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) requires students to develop multiple literacies in addition to foreign language skills and intercultural communicative competence. This chapter looks at the intersection of technology and teaching ELF, examining mutual contributions of technologies, more specifically Web 2.0, and ELF to each other, and the challenges in designing and implementing collaboration projects across cultures. Moreover, it looks at how the development of digital competencies in ELF (DELf) can be enhanced through the implementation of Web 2.0 mediated intercultural dialogues. The detail of the research design including internet tools used, participants and tasks are also discussed. Data analysis points to a positive attitude towards telecollaboration, also providing confirmation of some of the problems identified in theoretical framework, such as different levels of personal engagement.

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EUROPEAN DIALOGUE PROJECT: COLLABORATING TO IMPROVE ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Globalization is one of the most debated phenomena of the present age. The term itself did not appear before the 1970s, but now pervades contemporary political rhetoric and is a keyword of both academic and popular discourse on economy, society, technology and culture. Given the complexity of globalization, it is unsurprising that several conceptualisations have been proposed to shed light on its many shades of meaning. In Giddens's (1990) terms for example, it refers to "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (p. 64). Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton (1999) focus on the spatial dimension of globalization, and they define it as a process or set of processes which involve all social domains, e.g. politics, business, culture and the environment. Finally, Friedman (2005) concludes that the world has shrunk from size "small" to size "tiny" because of technological facilities, which have also contributed to "flattening the playing field at the same time" (p. 10).

In fact, over the past years Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have entered every area of society and influenced every aspect of our social and cultural lives. Educational institutions, however, despite being firmly rooted in our broader social and cultural milieu, have, at times, been left largely unchanged by the technological developments that have swept through society. As a consequence, students raised in a world of instant information and interactive technologies have been confronted with educational practices which may have struck them as rigid, inflexible and outmoded. This is no new criticism, as more than 30 years ago Byrne (1976) highlighted the need to reduce the degree of seriality which tended to characterise classroom learning.

In the face of these pedagogical concerns, ICTs can prove extremely valuable. One of their more visible attributes lies in their ability to move beyond the sequential nature of classroom teaching providing meanwhile other educational benefits. These include, for instance, the offer of a virtually unlimited array of authentic materials, the contact with up-to-date information about language use, and the possibility to address a potentially global audience.

This chapter reports on two online collaboration projects developed by four European universities and carried out in the spring of 2014 and 2015, running from March to June.

Students, working in international teams, were asked to discuss and compare the values shared by young people in Italy, Portugal, Germany and France, being in charge of designing and carrying out a collaborative survey to assess students' views on specific topics. In the first project the topics were related to values within Europe, while in 2015 it was decided to tackle issues connected with corporate social responsibility (CSR). The findings were shared in a joint compendium. Later, students were asked to evaluate the project in an online questionnaire. Several Web 2.0 tools were available for the participants. Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences provided their e-learning platform, ILIAS, known as LEA (Lernen und Arbeiten online, i.e. learning and working online). Furthermore, ADOBE Connect 9, a collaboration software used for online meetings, was provided by the German Research Network. In addition, participants used Facebook groups, Skype and Google Drive for their collaboration.

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