Chapter XXXII
Adapting to Virtual Third Space Language Learning Futures

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a basis for thinking about the dynamics and boundaries of foreign language learning in virtual learning communities of the future. It is suggested that their members increasingly create and operate in so called Virtual Third Spaces. Teaching and learning in these environments requires an adaptive pedagogy that goes beyond mere enthusiasm and technophilia to render them successful. Adaptations in pedagogical practice are proposed in three categories: (1) affective, (2) cognitive, and (3) operational. Consideration is given to the roles of both the learner and educator. Attention is also drawn to an important ethical dimension pertinent for the online virtual environment, but seldom mentioned in the language learning literature: data and information privacy. The chapter concludes by imagining some online language learning futures.

INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of language skills and intercultural competencies presupposes a feedback loop of interactive opportunities, exploration, reflection, mediation, and understanding. One way to do this is by engaging students in purposeful, communicative interactions (be they semantic, pragmatic, or relationship-building) and by providing them with "real-world tasks" designed to solve complex "real-world issues" (Butorac, 1997). Over the last 50 years or more, a number of technologies have been explored for their potential to support students in this effort. They range from the language laboratories of the 1950s and 1960s to the interactive computer assisted language learning exercises of the 1990s to today's blended learning communities that integrate face-to-face teaching with diverse wired or wireless Internet-based technologies built

around authentic, project-based learning activities (Pouchol, 2004). Indeed, for learners of a foreign language and their instructors, the Internet is fast becoming an important vector for unlimited social, creative, and linguistic learning opportunities on a local, national, or international scale. As most language students are unable to immerse themselves in their target language and culture first-hand, the Internet can artificially create such possibilities by allowing them to create their own Virtual Third Space on the Web. The chapter begins by characterizing the Virtual Third Space as located within virtual learning communities of the future and describes some of its particularities and benefits for language learners. Furthermore, the chapter highlights various affective, cognitive, and operational pedagogical adaptations that can support language learning and intercultural learning processes. It proceeds by emphasizing the importance of an often overlooked aspect of learning in porous, persistent Web-based environments where data and information are being collected, exchanged, and stored indefinitely: the protection of an individual's privacy. The final section concludes with providing some glimpses of future trends with regard to learning in Web-based environments.

BACKGROUND

On the Web, Virtual Third Spaces are created within virtual learning communities. Virtual learning communities strive toward being supportive and collaborative groups of learners, practitioners, and/or professionals who come together for a common purpose. They engage in sharing ideas and using their individual experiences, knowledge, and resources to address or solve specific problems or to undertake a particular project creatively and collaboratively (Wenger, 1999). While these communities currently require expensive setups, the next-generation technologies are getting smaller; are more intuitive, less

costly, and increasingly mobile; changing the way many people will conduct their affairs in the future, with important consequences for students. Virtual learning is one aspect of that change. Virtual learning communities have arisen for several reasons, some of which are outlined by Lewis and Allan (2005), such as:

- Working and communicating with others, even across national borders
- Pursuing cooperative and collaborative partnerships
- Solving problems together efficiently and effectively
- Decreasing the cost of travel and other incidentals
- Allowing for continuous learning and professional development

For language learners, some additional reasons can be mentioned, such as:

- Providing novel platforms for mediated language learning
- Creating exciting transcultural communicative spaces
- Facilitating intercultural communication
- Increasing opportunities for complex, real-life, immersive encounters

In the institutionalized foreign language learning context, virtual learning communities are seldom stand-alone entities. Instead, they form part of a blended learning environment, combining computer-supported learning with face-to-face interactions in classrooms and institutions. However, with commercial social networking sites entering the foreign language learning market, there is likely to be a greater shift toward Web-only learning environments.

This journey into the future requires preparation in the present. Virtual learning communities are not created in a vacuum. In the institutional setting at least, preparing foreign language classes

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