Exploring the transnational connections between blended learning spaces, trans-institutional collaboration, and intercultural awareness in transformative telecollaborative projects

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Abstract

This introductory essay aims to shed light on the theoretical *naison d'être*, the intersections within, and the main lines shared by the five essays that make up this section. The section is dedicated to transnational and blended learning spaces in telecollaborative, trans-institutional projects. This piece pivots on the increasingly important and pervasive theoretical notion of the "Spatial Turn" (Bachmann-Medick 2016, 211-243), which has become increasingly visible in, among other fields, pedagogy and cultural studies, and more specifically in the idea of boundary-crossing and hybridisation not only of physical but also of methodological spaces. This introductory essay shows how these five scholarly pieces contribute in different ways to enriching the interdisciplinary scholarly space at the intersection of intercultural awareness and technology-enhanced teaching and learning of foreign languages and cultures.

Keywords: blended learning, curriculum innovation, foreign language and culture teaching and learning (TaL), Intercultural Awareness, trans-institutional collaboration

1. Introduction¹

This co-edited section on digitally-enhanced foreign language and culture pedagogy in a cross-institutional, transnational, and transcultural environ-

¹This article is the result of the joint efforts of its four co-authors. However, should a distinction be made for institutional reasons: Giovanna Carloni wrote section 3; Samuele Grassi wrote section 2; Anita Virga wrote section 4; Brian Zuccala wrote the abstract and section 1.



ment brings together contributions from scholars who come from markedly different research backgrounds and are at different career stages in Higher Education, as academics, researchers, teachers/practitioners, and instructors. It aims to advance the state of the art in the scholarship on international collaborations between institutions involved in the field of foreign language and culture teaching and learning (hereafter, TaL) from both a theoretical and a pragmatic perspective. The five essays included here develop relevant case studies building on the interconnections between different areas of pedagogical and critical inquiry, including intercultural awareness and cross-cultural competence, blended foreign language and culture TaL, and transnational collaborative teaching, all of which can be understood. As will become clearer in the proceeding paragraphs – these concepts are linked in different ways to the so-called "spatial turn" (Bachmann-Medick 2016, 211-243), which has occurred in the humanities and social sciences in the past two decades.

For three of the four editors of the section (Carloni, Virga, Zuccala), this is an opportunity to present and discuss different facets of an ongoing and growing Italian Studies-centred transnational project that deploys digital pedagogical theories and practices for teaching language and culture, developed at Monash University (Melbourne, Australia), in collaboration with the University of Urbino (Italy) and the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa). This discussion aims not only to advance the theoretical knowledge which grounds such practices, but also to refine the practices themselves. The section is complemented by incursions into the fields of secondary school teacher training and of curriculum development for International Branch Campuses. Although the primary focus of the section are digital and technology-enhanced teaching tools, methods, and strategies, this collection of articles is also intended to stimulate reflections on wider issues that increasingly characterise higher educational institutions today and can be seen as pertaining to the field of critical pedagogy (i.e. Morgan 2000). Of particular concern in this regard are "mobility", "internationalisation", and "professionalisation" of students. What falls under the rubric of TaL is in fact shown to contribute increasingly to the educational progress of so-called "mobile" and "interculturally-aware", "global" students, cast as future "citizens"².

2. Theoretical and pragmatic outlines: The "spatial turn" and the crossing of methodological and physical boundaries in Higher Education

Before explaining the structure of the section and providing an overview of the content of the five essays and the connections between them, it is im-

²The underlying socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics/processes and implications of these terms problematise their use and understanding, hence our decision to apply the double inverted commas while explaining the analytical and methodological approaches used in this introductory section.

portant to outline the scholarly landscape in which these essays are grounded, beginning with an overview of its theoretical context and conceptual premises.

The purpose of the section must be understood with reference to the notion of the "spatial turn". The "spatial turn" generally refers to a cultural trend over the last two decades which has been responsible for, as Warf and Arias put it, the "reinsertion of space into the social sciences and the humanities" (2009). In this framework "space" refers not only to a geographical notion but also to a hermeneutic tool. Broadly speaking, some version of such a spatial turn, in its pedagogical dimension, appears to have penetrated and informed the very nature of twenty-first-century Higher Education, one that has increasingly valued instances of what it seems appropriate to term "hybridisation" and "boundary-crossing". Here, these two concepts are to be understood both in a more literal and "physical" sense, and in a more "abstract" and figurative sense. On the one hand hybridisation is actualised, for instance, in endeavours on the part of Higher Education institutions to expand beyond national boundaries, through both cross-institutional collaborations and the establishment of international satellite entities; on the other hand, and from a more theoretical perspective, hybridisation has meant incrementally combining pedagogical and research methodologies under the rubric of trans- and inter-disciplinarity, which is still widely considered the most suitable approaches to exploring the ever-growing complexity of the contemporary world in a pedagogical environment.

Within this double "spatial" framework of both physical/geographical and conceptual/methodological boundary-crossing there are obvious and intrinsic connections between the globalization and inter-disciplinarity of tertiary education, and foreign language and culture TaL. These interrelations are, to say the least, multi-faceted, and go well beyond (yet without excluding) the traditional case of students enrolled in foreign language and culture programmes. Examples range from the need for most international students in any country, regardless of their course of study, to familiarize themselves with the language and culture of the host country, to the various cases of exchange students in foreign universities or international branches (i.e. the case discussed in the last essay of Australian students at Monash University Prato Centre, hereafter MUPC) needing to immerse themselves in the host linguistic and cultural environment. Each of these scenarios entails unique pedagogical implications and specificities. Along these lines, then, one could legitimately argue that the inherent relevance of foreign languages and cultures has increased enormously and that with this increased importance have come not only increased educational responsibilities (also of an ethical nature, for instance, in relation to racism and intolerance), but also challenges of both a theoretical and a more pragmatic nature, on the part of institutions as well as of learners.

Broadly speaking, the core theoretical notions that virtually all of these different scenarios must confront are those of "Intercultural awareness"

(hereafter, IA) and "global citizenship" (hereafter, GC). If one aims to cater for these educational imperatives, it is apparent how the often-limited time and space of a traditional face-to-face class, session, and even an entire course are insufficient, and therefore must be expanded through opening up and negotiating further spaces for intercultural and inter-linguistic interactions to foster IA and GC. However, physical spaces of this kind are rarely available in a context in which educators/researchers and learners are seldom situated in the same geographical location. On a pragmatic level, in the last decade technology seems to have become the primary means through which new and digital and/or hybrid spaces of educational interactions are created. Learning Platforms, Pre-departure Online Toolkits, as well as Telecollaboration and/or Online intercultural Exchange (Chun 2015, 5) are only some of the means increasingly used to blend traditional face-to-face courses and to enrich and complement traditional tuition. Differently put, through technology, traditional notions such as that of a "literature class" or a "grammar workshop" (the two sometimes artificially compartmentalized) have been enriched with new content and new meaning. These become pedagogical practices with great scholarly potential. Given the content of the essays in this collection, it is appropriate to focus specifically on telecollaboration in isolation and analyse how it problematizes the notion of learning space in ways which appear pedagogically significant.

3. Telecollaboration and the hybridisation of learning spaces

In Higher Education (HE), Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), "a term that has been in common use in the EU research community for the past 15 years" (Scanlon, Conole 2018, 1), has been used with increased frequency in the global scholarly community. In tertiary educational environments, the interdisciplinary dimension of TEL has emerged as a key component of digital pedagogy. In fact, as Scanlon and Conole (*ibidem*) point out: "TEL focuses on investigating how technologies are used for education and therefore draws on subject areas related to learning and teaching (education, psychology, etc.) and those concerned with technology (computer science, information science, etc.), as well as conventions surrounding different subject domains". Knowledge creation in digital learning environments represents another pivotal dimension of TEL (*ibidem*, 2), which has developed concurrently with the newly emerging conceptualizations of space and space-related culture the above-mentioned spatial turn has brought about:

In the new globalized order, culture is less defined by [compartmentalised] spaces, such as nation-states or geographical regions, and increasingly defined by spheres of activity. One culture can exist in multiple spaces, and multiple cultures can coexist in one space (Blommaert 2010, 63). Similarly, personal presence is less tied to physical

spaces and can be distributed across virtual spaces, some requiring 'here-and-now' attention to project oneself 'there', such as videoconferencing, and others that can rely on interfaces (and sometimes algorithms) to allow simultaneous sharing of presence via multiple channels (e.g., texting, e-mail, social media). (Kern, Develotte 2018, 2)

As operationalisations of TEL, telecollaborative initiatives have developed extensively over the years. They have been implemented through joint international practices engaging groups of students located in geographically distant locations, who interact by means of asynchronous activities and synchronous desktop videoconferencing (DVC). "Sometimes referred to as telecollaboration (Belz 2002; Kern 2014) or online intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, Lewis 2016), virtual exchange involves engaging students in online collaborative exchange projects with partner-classes under the guidance of their teachers" (O'Dowd 2018, 2). Numerous types of virtual exchange, which include various degrees of "pedagogically-structured online collaborative learning initiatives" (Dooly, O'Dowd 2018, 11), have been implemented so far: "The term 'telecollaboration' has been used to describe many different types of online exchange, ranging from loosely guided language practice of the target language (e.g. online conversations in text or oral chat) to elaborately designed project-based collaborative exchanges" (*ibidem*, 17).

Overall, online intercultural exchanges (OIEs) aim to foster the development of foreign language skills and intercultural awareness through culture-based activities. As regards language development, it is worth noting that OIE students' lack of teaching skills, such as providing focus on form and customized feedback to partner learners, has emerged as a challenge in virtual exchanges: "sufficient opportunities for focus on form, negotiation of meaning and corrective feedback do not occur naturally in online exchange and need to be promoted through careful task design and training of the learners to work as linguistic guides and tutors for their partners" (Lewis, O'Dowd 2016, 66). As a result, Pre-Service Teachers, who have the teaching skills suitable to enhance students' foreign language learning development, have been increasingly engaged in telecollaborative projects. In OIEs, a group of students is thus more and more likely to interact with Pre-Service Teachers studying at another institution worldwide, rather than, for instance, with a more or less randomly selected peer.

For intercultural awareness to be fostered in OIEs, intercultural sensitivity needs to be enhanced through explicit training (Bennett 1993; Belz 2002; Liddicoat, Scarino 2013). In this respect, an ever-increasing although challenging objective of telecollaborative projects is the development of global citizenship, which envisions learners as working actively to deal with world issues (Leask 2015, 17) while tackling them in context-specific settings (Porto, Byram 2015, 24). To develop global citizens ready to act and interact in multilingual and international contexts through active citizenship (Wagner, Byram 2017, 3), implemented through civic actions in their own national communities (Porto, Houghton, Byram 2017), intercultural citizenship needs to be developed in telecollaborative learners. In particular, Byram's concept of intercultural citizenship entails:

- Learning more about one's own country by comparison

- Learning more about 'otherness' in one's own country (especially linguistic/ ethnic minorities)

- Becoming involved in activity outside school

- Making class-to-class links to compare and act on a topic in two or more countries. (Byram 2008, 130)

From this intercultural and global citizenship perspective, OIE tasks are expected to foster transformative processes in the students engaged in telecollaboration (Porto, Houghton, Byram 2017, 3). For example, an OIE targeted at promoting learners' intercultural citizenship has been implemented between Argentinian and Italian university students; in this virtual exchange, learners were engaged in a series of activities focusing on mural art and graffiti (Porto 2017, 226). The project first "challenged the students to research, analyse and reflect on these forms of expression [mural art and graffiti]" (*ibidem*, 226) both in their own and their partners' country and then required learners to carry out civic actions in their own socio-cultural contexts. The development of intercultural citizenship, including civic actions in local national communities, was not accomplished to the same extent by both groups, with Argentinians acting more thoroughly and at a deeper level in their social context (*ibidem*); this result suggests that "[t]here is a challenge [...] about how to make linguistic-competence oriented courses not only intercultural but also citizenship-oriented" (*ibidem*, 237).

The development of OIEs has also led to the creation of new space-related constructs and screen-based interactions: "new subjective and intersubjective spaces [were] born of screen-based communication [...] Perceptions and representations of the other are constructed and constrained through resources of the screen" (Kern, Develotte 2018, 15-18). In this respect, the concept of social presence is strictly connected to the newly emerging and constantly shifting online spaces leading to digitally-mediated interactions. In particular, social presence encompasses "subjective projections of self [...] into technology mediated environments, subjective assessment of others' presence and assessment of the subject's relations with others" (Kehrwald 2010, 41). For an effective social presence in online learning spaces within a telecollaborative framework, Pre-Service Teachers need to develop customized skills suitable to manage online multimodal interactions effectively:

[...] the challenge faced by educators in technology-mediated environments presents itself as being threefold: becoming multimodality aware and competent in

order to establish their social presence (first challenge) so that they can successfully participate in the collaborative creation and sharing of knowledge (second challenge) and are well equipped to model such competence and participatory skills for their students (third challenge). (Hauck, Müge Satar 2018, 134)

To foster the development of this set of digitally-driven pedagogical competences, Pre-Service Teachers involved in OIEs entailing on-screen communication need to engage in reflective teaching extensively through: "critical reflection on the medium, on students' interactions, and on the misunderstandings they generate" (Develotte, Kern 2018, 284).

4. From critical theory to pedagogical practice: Five essay on telecollaboration and interculturally aware student mobility

From the literature review conducted above, it is clear that telecollaboration is a rapidly changing field where both new digital conceptual spaces and types of screen-based interaction emerge. These consistently require the interactants, such as Pre-Service Teachers and/or educators/instructors, to develop cutting-edge competences to devise and implement tasks which foster language learning, intercultural awareness and/or intercultural citizenship effectively within a multilingual and intercultural socio-cultural framework.

Following these theoretical premises, this collection of five essays is loosely organised along two trajectories, which have to do with the notions of hybridisations of physical and imaginative space illustrated above, one proceeding from the classroom level to the institutional level, another focussing on ways to achieve boundary-crossing in teaching foreign languages and cultures. Along these lines, the core focus of this section is on European languages and cultures (primarily but not exclusively Italian) taught as foreign languages and cultures in Europe, Australia and South Africa. This topic is addressed both from the point of view of the learner and from the point of view of teachers and teachers' training. The collection also hosts one conclusive contribution featuring a broader approach to curriculum development (and intercultural enrichment) for study abroad programs.

Giovanna Carloni and Brian Zuccala ("Blending Italian 'down-under': Toward a theoretical framework and pragmatic guide for blending tertiary Italian language and culture courses through Skype-enhanced, pre-service teacher-centred telecollaboration") opens the section with a doubly-framed essay aimed at providing both a theoretical scaffolding and a set of guidelines to both curriculum developers (in Australia) and Pre-Service Teacher trainers in Italy, for designing and implementing Skype-mediated blended units for Italian tertiary programmes. The framework Carloni and Zuccala begin to devise intends, by means of technology, to give what was in essence an in-built time issue (intrinsic time constraints in Italian classes leading to perceived scarce interaction in the target language and exposure to foreign culture) a "spatial" answer: the project "Let's go digital" responds by creating a virtual and space, parallel to the spacetime continuum of traditional in class-tuition, which students inhabit which a greater degree of autonomy and metacognitive awareness.

In "The challenges of digitally-mediated Italian language and culture development: Engaging the online learner through gamifcation" Giorgia Bassani, Margherita Bezzi, and Luca Mă explore the ways in which the boundaries between learning and gaming can be renegotiated in a blended environment, drawing on the same "Let's Go Digital" skype-enhanced project, in which all three authors have been involved as teachers and co-developers. In particular, the essay focuses on ways in which enhancing curiosity and fun inside the classroom can boost learners' acquisition of concrete language and intercultural skills, while also contributing to new materialisations of digital learning strategies and tools.

Space-power relationships are even more crucially at stake in Anita Virga's piece "Transformation through telecollaboration: A working hypothesis on the transformative potential of blended spaces for (Italian) foreign language acquisition in South Africa", which can be seen as an illustration of how methodologies themselves can trespass national boundaries and can (and must) be adapted to new contexts in a space-sensitive manner. Virga postulates that "Let's go digital", once adapted and re-contextualized, has the characteristics to impact positively on the South African landscape of second language acquisition.

The often too neat divide between tertiary and secondary level pedagogical practices is the focus of the fourth essay. Here Barry Pennock-Speck and Begoña Clavel-Arroitia ("Teachers' perspectives on telecollaboration in secondary school foreign language education") make a case for a greater fluidity between HE-driven initiatives and secondary school-oriented projects, on the basis of a Europe-wide survey showing the perceived benefits of blended practices from the point of view of school teachers in several countries, including Spain and Germany.

The last essay included in this collection is a deliberate leap toward the physical spaces of International Branch campuses and the bubble of monoculturalism they are often accused of creating within the host culture. In the context of one of these branches, specifically an Italian campus of an Australian University, Nadine Normand-Marconnet, Samuele Grassi, and Narelle McAuliffe ("Intercultural enrichment programs: A contribution to curriculum development and study abroad in transnational education") discuss the development and implementation of an intercultural enrichment program, speaking to cogent issues in the fields of study abroad experiences and curricula. Often perceived as "add ons" to curricular activities, cultural enrichment initiatives sit uneasily with constraints of time and of the curricular activities of "mobile students". They also challenge the need to gain a more thorough understanding of a different socio-cultural environment, and students' own positioning as (un)willing, (un)skilled "(inter)cultural actors/agents" inside and outside academia, at home as well as abroad.

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