Many language teachers are now integrating online exchanges between classes in different countries into their courses, supported by an increasing body of literature describing tasks for learners to carry out online and analysing their value in terms of language acquisition. Comparatively little careful attention, however, has been paid to the extent to which such ‘telecollaboration’ contributes to intercultural learning. All too often, the virtual version of the ‘contact hypothesis’ is assumed, that is, that contact (online in this case) automatically results in positive attitudes and increased intercultural awareness. Since 2000, a number of articles have challenged this assumption and emphasized the pitfalls and the importance of genre and of task design in telecollaboration (Belz and Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Kramsch and Thorne, 2002; Ware, 2005). Clearly online exchanges offer real potential for intercultural learning, but it is the way in which they are designed, prepared and exploited that will determine the pedagogical payoff.

In proposing a systematic exploration of the ways in which telecollaboration may (or may not) contribute to the development of language learners’ intercultural competence, this book fills a gap in the research on language learning and technology. It not only discusses a range of stimulating activities teachers could adopt, using a variety of online media and genres, but more importantly analyses the conditions for successful online intercultural learning in each case – and what can be learnt from less successful attempts.

A major strength of the book is the way it situates its case studies within the wider research framework. O’Dowd’s book stands out in giving a comprehensive picture of the ways in which developments and debates in the teaching of culture on the one hand (culture-specific or culture-general, knowledge or skills), and in the use of technology in language learning on the other hand (behaviouristic CALL, communicative CALL, Network-Based Language Teaching), intersect. The discussion of these two related branches of pedagogy usefully contextualizes current trends. It also enables O’Dowd to establish a methodological basis for his approach, which combines ‘the principles of action research with elements of ethnography’ (p. 98). He draws on Byram’s theorization of the objectives of intercultural learning, which emphasizes ‘the ability to identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one’s own and other cultures’ (1997, 53) rather than the inculcation of positive attitudes.
O’Dowd distances himself from the optimistic technophilia that has characterized some of the research on telecollaboration, and emphasizes the ‘gap between potential and achievement’ (p.72) rather than glossing over the problems and risks in using technology to promote intercultural learning. Just over half the book is devoted to three case studies involving German and Anglophone (Irish, US) students, each of which entails multiple genres of telecollaboration. The activities discussed go well beyond superficial ‘key-pal’ exchanges, incorporating principles of Cultural Studies and techniques of ethnographic interviewing into tasks using email, online discussion and video-conferencing. While none of the case studies are narratives of failure, neither are they stories of unqualified success. Analysis of the difficulties encountered enables O’Dowd to draw conclusions about the conditions necessary for intercultural learning to take place.

O’Dowd is sensitive to the differences in genre between the various telecollaborative exercises. This is particularly evident in the comparison between email and videoconferencing as a means of eliciting cultural values and information in ‘virtual ethnographic interviewing’. The videoconferencing involved not only different turn-taking patterns but elicited a different kind of cultural knowledge (less factual, less detailed, more anchored in personal experience), in comparison with the email exchanges, and O’Dowd found that the intensity of the video interaction was most effectively used for clarification of earlier email discussion points. This attention to genre differences means that simplistic extrapolations from one type of activity to another are avoided. Different media can be exploited for different purposes, and can be usefully combined.

Reflecting on the case studies, O’Dowd draws several conclusions about the teacher’s role. Firstly, he emphasizes the crucial importance of the time and effort put into developing a close working relationship between the partner teachers in the two countries involved. Secondly he argues that facilitating contact between the students is only a first step, and that teachers need to take an active role in exploiting the activity in the classroom in order to develop intercultural competence. Here he provides some guidelines stemming from the other major finding from the case studies, concerning the need for skills development among students prior to the online activity.

O’Dowd demonstrates that ‘interacting on-line in intercultural exchanges is not a natural skill, but one which must be explicitly developed by the teacher’ (p.180). What students need to know in order to participate successfully is neither innate, nor simply transferable from previous experiences. They need to be taught questioning techniques, ways of eliciting cultural perspectives in addition to factual information, ways of deducing cultural values from the responses they receive, ways of reflecting on and responding to arguments and comments to which their immediate reaction is negative, and ways of
keeping the communication channels open. In short, they need to be taught intercultural communication skills. O’Dowd makes the point that ‘what learners take away from their on-line work depends, to a great extent, on the skills and cultural awareness which they bring to it in the first place’ (p.228). It becomes apparent that telecollaboration does not in itself foster intercultural learning. Rather, with the right pedagogical framework, it provides a rich opportunity to try out the skills learnt in class, and results in a series of memorable interactions calling for reflection and analysis.

In discussing the intercultural learning necessary for students to participate in the online activities, O’Dowd could perhaps make more of the potential for student learning about communication. Although he mentions that ‘different cultural approaches to e-mail and internet use helped to shape the dynamic of the intercultural relationships’ (p.140) and contrasts cultural patterns in the construal of emails as friendly and business-like by the participants (pp.142–143), this could be taken further, by encouraging more explicit student reflection not only on cultural meanings and values, but on how these impact on communication styles and practices in the various online genres. There are also occasional lapses into a somewhat naive view of one’s face – in face-to-face communication – as supplying the truth of identity (p.81, 187), which could be rethought in the light of contemporary research on cyber-identities (see for example Thurlow et al., 2004; Donath, 1999).

O’Dowd does, however, emphasize an important aspect of telecollaboration that can be overlooked when the focus is on wider patterns of cultural difference, and that is the extent to which communication goals can be very localized. His second case study, for example, does not simply mobilize communication between The Germans and The Irish, but rather between particular groups of students working in particular socio-cultural and institutional contexts (Belz, 2001; Kramsch and Thorne, 2002), and whose priorities (dispelling a certain myth of one’s country, building relationships, collecting information) may not coincide.

The book is marred by lapses in editorial care and would be enhanced by the inclusion of an index: however these are technical deficiencies. Through its careful analysis of the conditions under which telecollaborative activities can foster intercultural learning, O’Dowd’s book makes a major contribution to what Kern et al. (2004) identify as a ‘socio-cognitive turn’ in research on network-based language teaching (pp.243–244) and a new emphasis on culture in this field.

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REFERENCES