EXPANDING LEARNING SPACES: VIRTUAL PLACES OF LEARNING IN AN ONLINE INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE PROJECT BETWEEN THE U.S.A. AND ITALY

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Sommario
Questo articolo presenta un progetto di telecollaborazione per l'acquisizione di una lingua straniera elaborato da Roberta Trapè, Università di Melbourne e Francesca Calamita, Università della Virginia (UVa). Il progetto fa parte del "Language Forward Initiative", un'iniziativa ben più ampia promossa dall'Institute of World Languages (UVa) per creare programmi immersivi online che mirino ad espandere le opportunità per studentesse e studenti che studiano una lingua straniera presso l'Università della Virginia di interagire con parlanti madrelingua all'estero. "Telecollaboration", "online intercultural exchange" o "virtual exchange" sono definizioni che vengono usate per far riferimento a incontri interculturali di discenti che interagiscono online, e a progetti di collaborazione con partner che provengono da diversi contesti culturali e/o da diversi luoghi geografici, come parte integrante dei curricola istituzionali. Il progetto "Language Forward Initiative" tra Italia e Stati Uniti verrà sviluppato in tre anni (2018-2021) e si basa su uno scambio virtuale tra 'Italian Studies' (UVa) e una scuola superiore italiana a Milano. Il progetto ha creato spazi virtuali, paralleli allo spazio-tempo tradizionale delle lezioni in classe, nei quali studentesse e studenti hanno l'opportunità di utilizzare e produrre la lingua straniera e le loro conoscenze in un contesto significativo. L'idea portante è quella di condurre i discenti in uno spazio 'altro' virtuale e relazionale, nel quale possano esaminare fenomeni e sperimentare la loro posizione culturale mentre cercano di entrare nel mondo culturale degli altri (Scarino, 2014:391). Studentesse e studenti statunitensi sono stati associati a studentesse e studenti che vivono in Italia per parlare in gruppi da due in videoconferenza attraverso Skype di argomenti selezionati dalle docenti. Le attività che si svolgono fuori dalla classe in questo spazio alternativo hanno favorito lo sviluppo delle capacità di interazione e di conversazione in lingua

straniera, ma hanno anche incoraggiato il pensiero critico e comparativo e le competenze interculturali. Il progetto si svilupperà nei due anni successivi in uno scambio virtuale basato su temi di cittadinanza interculturale.

Keywords: Online intercultural exchange; telecollaboration; virtual learning space; intercultural competence; intercultural citizenship

1.   Virtual Spaces

In order to introduce the transnational telecollaborative project between the University of Virginia (Italian Studies), and an Italian upper-secondary school it will be necessary to provide a brief reflection on the terms 'space' and 'virtual'.

1.1   *Space and Place in Contemporary Society*

The diverse ways in which space and place have been theorised and employed to make sense of the world in the last five decades demonstrate how spatial concepts are central to contemporary times. Since the beginning of the 1970s the debate on the perception of space has been particularly lively, and numerous insightful studies have been published[1]. In 1970 Jurij M. Lotman (1922-1993) argued that "the language of spatial relations" is a "basic means for comprehending reality". He affirmed that the most common social, religious, political and moral models of the world are inevitably regulated by space. In 1974, in his seminal text *La production de*

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[1]   We will not explore the extremely vast and complex literature on this issue, and will very briefly refer to four thinkers, in particular Jurij M. Lotman, Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Edward W. Soja. We will just mention here some other names among the most influential thinkers in theoretical debates over space and place. This is a representative, not exhaustive, selection of names (mainly from Anglo-American and French academia) relevant to contemporary understanding of space and place: Benedict Anderson; Marc Augé; Jean Baudrillard; Zygmunt Bauman; Homi K. Bhabha; Judith Butler; Pierre Bourdieu; Michel de Certeau; Gilles Deleuze; David Harvey; Anthony Giddens; Stuart Hall; Donna Haraway; Bruno Latour; Edward W. Said; Saskia Sassen; Nigel Thrif; Paul Virilio; John Urry.

l'espace (here in English trans., 1991), Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) dealt with social space. He attempted to establish the importance of 'lived' experiences and argued that geographical space is fundamentally social. Lefebvre implied that 'absolute space' cannot exist because it is colonised by social activity. Every society produces its own space, which is a realm of social relations.

In 1989, Edward Soja (1940-2015) referred to Lefebvre, and in his book *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* reiterated and confirmed the importance of the study of space. He contended that our current environment is, above all else, a social construction of space.

Referring to Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, in *Thirdspace* (1996), Soja criticised the two prevailing modes of analysing space, an influential approach that interpreted the spatiality of our lives primarily in terms of the configuration of material forms, mappable "things in space", and a more subjective alternative that emphasised mental representations of those material mappable forms. Lefebvre called these two modes 'conceived space' (professional and theoretical; cartographers, urban planners, property speculators) and 'perceived space' (of everyday social life and commonsensical perception). He proposed a third model and called it 'lived space': the person who is fully human also dwells in a 'lived space' of the imagination.

In a similar way, Foucault noted these two dominant modes of thinking about space, and suggested that they were insufficient to understand the simultaneously real and imagined "other spaces" in which we live, in which our individual biographies are played out, in which social relations develop and change, and in which history is made. In a lecture given by Foucault in 1967 on "Des espaces autres", and in an essay published in 1984 with the same title, Foucault described space as an active and heterogeneous medium. What Lefebvre called "lived space", Foucault called "*espaces autres*", "other spaces", significantly different spaces, a counter-space that exists outside the usual order of things. In the essay "Des espaces autres" Foucault clearly reaffirmed the centrality of space[2].

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2   "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. […]. In any case I believe
     that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more

Soja's concept of "third space" is derived from Foucault's and Lefebvre's notion of a counter-space (Foucault's '*espaces autres*'and Lefebvre's 'lived space'). He uses the concept of "third space" to refer to a particular way of thinking about and interpreting socially produced space. It is a way of thinking that sees the spatiality of our lives, the human geographies in which we live, as having the same scope and critical significance as the historical and social dimensions of our lives[3].

In his 1967 lecture "Des espaces autres", Foucault refers to space as a "cultural construct" and "social product". This can be traced back to the concept of the "Spatial Turn", a cultural trend which led to the reinsertion of the question of space into the social sciences and humanities in these decades.

If we consider the "Spatial Turn" from a pedagogical perspective, as well as the conceptualisations of a counter-space, a "thirdspace", by Foucault, Lefebvre and Soja, we can detect a possible connection between this counter-space and the development of an alternative learning space, expanded and shaped by social relations, a "(relational) counter-space"[4]. The relevance of foreign languages and cultures has increased immensely; the necessity of expanding learning environments through opening up and negotiating further spaces for inter-linguistic and intercultural interactions is now evident. Ways to achieve alternative, meaningful environments in teaching foreign languages and cultures can be experimented with in the creation of "counter-spaces", built by the social relations and spatial practices

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than with time. […]. We do not live inside a void […], we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. Of course one might attempt to describe these different sites by looking for the set of relations by which a given site can be defined" (Foucault, 1986:27).

[3]   In *Seeking Spatial Justice* (2010) Soja writes: "For at least the past century, thinking about the interrelated historical and social aspects of our lives has tended to be much more important and widely practiced than emphasising a pertinent critical spatial perspective. […]. In recent years, however, the way we interpret the relation between the social, the historical, and the spatial aspects of our lives has begun to change in significant ways. A new and different approach to thinking about space and spatiality has been emerging in conjunction with what some have described as a spatial turn affecting nearly all the human sciences (Soja, 2010:3).

[4]   The definition of "relational counter space" has been interestingly used by Sabine Knierbein (2015).

that take place in and through that space. These could be designed through cross-institutional collaborations.

For Lefebvre and for many other thinkers, place emerges as a particular form of space, one that is created through the distinctive activities and imaginings associated with particular social spaces[5]. Place thus represents a distinctive type of space which is defined by and constructed in terms of the lived experiences of people. Places are seen as fundamental in expressing a sense of belonging for those who live in them, and are seen as providing a locus for identity.

1.2   *The Virtual: Virtual Spaces as Places of Learning*

In "Rethinking the Virtual" Nicholas C. Burbules emphasises two fundamental ideas in relation to virtuality: the first is that "the key feature of the virtual is not the particular technology that produces the sense of immersion, but the sense of immersion itself" (Burbules, 2006:37). The second develops from the assumption that the separation between the "virtual" and the "real" is problematic. According to this idea, any reality that we inhabit is to some extent actively filtered, interpreted, constructed, or made. Therefore, the virtual should be understood "as a context where our own active response and involvement are part of what gives the experience its veracity and meaningfulness" (38). Burbules proposes his conception of the virtual through a series of steps. Firstly, he explores four processes of engagement through which immersion happens: interest, involvement, imagination and interaction, which will prove fundamental for understanding the educational potential of virtuality. Secondly, he applies this conception of the virtual to a discussion of virtual space, suggesting that as virtual spaces become familiar and significant, they become virtual places.

Burbules repositions virtuality outside of an exclusively technological domain, and sees it as a central educational concept. In explaining what gives virtual experiences the quality of immersion he

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[5]   The theoretical specification of space and place is still matter of some dispute. Elucidating the relationships between space and place remains a strong area of interest for scholars.

defines the abovementioned four interrelated factors at work: interest, involvement, imagination and interaction[6].

In immersive learning experiences, the virtual, as Burbules describes it, is a very concrete way of rethinking the nature of learning spaces, "spaces where creativity, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, experimentation, and inquiry can happen" (38). The online environment is seen as a space where students spend time, interact, and do things, for example collaborating with each other on a shared project in a shared space. The fact that they inhabit a shared space is essential for this collaboration to work. The online, networked environment supports community-building and the sharing of resources.

The sense of familiarity, inhabitance and comfort students feel in virtual space, especially when this is experienced in conjunction with the familiar engagements of other students, make virtual spaces virtual places. A place is a socially or subjectively meaningful space; it means something important to a person or to a group of people.

The elements of interest, involvement, interaction and imagination defined by Burbules actively shape our activities in space, and these activities can transform space. These activities can be collective; it is often the quality of a space as a shared space that plays a crucial role in its development into a place. Places become familiar, marked by various social conventions, they can become a locus of community. Both the space and those inhabiting the space are changed, transformed in relation to each other. A place is a special kind of

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6   "An experience is interesting to us when it is complex enough to allow us to pick up new elements, even with repeated encounters" (Burbules, 2006:41). Something which lacks interest cannot sustain a truly immersive experience. "An experience is involving when we have a reason to care about what we are experiencing" (41); we pay attention to it because it concerns us in some way. "An experience engages our imagination when we can interpolate or extrapolate new details and add to the experience through our own contribution" (41); actively going beyond the given is part of what engages us deeply in it. "An experience is interactive when it provides us with opportunities to participate in it […] through embodied action and response" (41). These characteristics make immersion a consequence of our active response and engagement with them, it is not something which happens to us. Burbules convincingly argues that the analysis of immersion he proposes has strong positive implications for the design of educational environments and experiences. Interest, involvement, imagination, and interactivity are essential educational resources if teachers mean to engage and motivate active student learning: in this sense, he affirms, "any truly educational experience is immersive, or in other words, virtual" (43).

space: "as spaces become places, there is always an element of the virtual to them (in other words, there is a quality of immersion, supported by the elements of interest, involvement, interaction and imagination)" (Burbules, 2006:50).

According to Burbules, there are two distinctive ways in which we turn spaces into places. One is mapping, by developing schemata that represent the space, identify important points within it, and facilitate movement within it. The second distinctive way in which spaces become places is through architecture. A space become a place when we build enduring structures into it. Burbules refers to architectures of language, of customs, of complex practices and activities; all of these can play a role in transforming a space into a place.

Burbules suggests that in virtual learning environments mapping indicates, on the whole, the perspective of the learner, while architecture indicates the perspective of the teacher; however, he does not separate the two roles entirely. A learner is asking, "How do I find my way about?", a teacher is asking "How do I design the learning space in such a way that my students will explore and use it in the way I intend them to do?". Mapping and architecture are both ways of turning virtual spaces into virtual places, more specifically virtual learning spaces into meaningful, hospitable virtual learning places. They do this by guiding the dynamics of interest, involvement, imagination and interaction in way that are judged to be educationally productive. Burbules affirms that

> when they are successful, the learning space become immersive – the learner is engaged, actively relating to the subject matter, seeing [and…] feeling its importance. […] a place (as opposed to a space) always entails, to some extent, the quality of the virtual; and so in this sense it is no exaggeration to say that a successful learning space, as it becomes a learning place, is in a wider sense by definition virtual. (Burbules, 2006:53)

This rethinking of the virtual as an educational concept poses a sharp contrast to much current practice, since it highlights the centrality of choice, decision and exploration as important dimensions of learning,

and thinks in terms of learning spaces (learning places), rather than "delivery systems". It also sees these learning places as potential sites of collaboration and communities of learners, and not just individual achievement (Burbules, 2006:54).

2.   Key Assumptions to Design the Transnational Telecollaborative Project

In the last decade technology seems to have become the primary means through which new virtual spaces of educational interactions are created. We will not linger here on detailed discussion related to the phenomenon of telecollaboration and its application in blended learning, since several insightful and complete studies have been carried out so far. There is an increasing amount of literature on initiatives related to joint international online learning environments that use synchronous video communication tools to teach a foreign language[7]. 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 synchronous desktop videoconferencing.

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[7]   We are particularly indebted to the following authors for their insightful studies on telecollaboration in projects carried out at Monash University, which inspired us in choosing the key assumptions to design our project, in designing the course and its future developments: Giovanna Carloni & Brian Zuccala, "Blending Italian at Monash University through an Italian-Australian Digital project: An analysis of Students' Perceptions" (2017); Giovanna Carloni, Samuele Grassi, Anita Virga & Brian Zuccala, "Exploring the transnational connections between blended learning spaces, trans-institutional collaboration, and intercultural awareness in transformative telecollaborative projects" (2018); Giovanna Carloni & 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" (2018). Robert O'Dowd's and Michael Byram's seminal work has been essential for our study.

2.1 *Online Intercultural Exchanges, Blended Learning and Knowledge-Building Approach*

Telecollaboration, online intercultural exchange (OIE) or virtual exchange[8], are terms used to refer to the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations, as an integrated part of their educational programmes. In recent years, approaches to virtual exchange have evolved in different contexts and different areas of education, and these approaches have had, at times, very diverse organisational structures and pedagogical objectives (O'Dowd, 2018). 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 exchanges, 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" (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018:17).

Telecollaboration experiences are usually implemented on campus through blended learning, which consists of a mix of face-to-face and online instruction modes. The transformative affordances of blended learning to foster pedagogical shifts and student agency have been highlighted: "Here, educators are seeking to substantially change learners from being passive receivers of information to active co-constructors of knowledge. […], blended approaches require the full and principled use of interactive technologies to foster agenda for transformation of learning" (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012:4).

Blended learning can overcome lecturer-centered approaches creating a learning environment in which the production of knowledge can be shared between the teacher and the learner; this opens up space for the learners to bring their own perspective and culture into the lesson. The project designers set out to develop a student-centered, context-driven digital learning model. As Marsh

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8   Robert O'Dowd proposes the use of 'Virtual Exchange' as an umbrella term (O'Dowd, 2018:3).

suggests, "Blended learning is, by its very nature, 'student-centered' […]. In student-centered teaching, […] learning is most meaningful […] when the students themselves are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge" (2012:8). The project designers thus develop an online learning environment which envisions learners as active meaning constructors. In this light, dialogical interaction plays a pivotal role in the design of the digital project.

Knowledge creation in digital learning environments represents another pivotal dimension of telecollaboration. The aim is to create an environment where the focus is not for the students to learn notions but to create ideas. According to the knowledge building tradition, learning is a spontaneous experience that happens without awareness and it is based on the information that the teacher "vertically" transmits to the students, whereas "knowledge creation/knowledge building is, in stark contrast, a type of deliberate, conscious action, which produces knowledge that has a public life" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2014:35). The idea behind knowledge-building applied to the classroom is that knowledge can be an experience shared by the teacher and the students and it leads to the creation of ideas which can have a "public life", a social utility beyond the classroom. With the knowledge-building approach the final result is obtained through the active and collaborative efforts of the teacher with the students. Students have an active role in the learning process and play a fundamental part in it.

2.2   *Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Citizenship*

Overall, online intercultural exchanges aim to foster the development of foreign language skills but also of intercultural competence through culture-based activities. Besides promoting language learning, telecollaborative tasks need to foster the intercultural analysis of the practices and values of the cultures of the groups involved in the virtual exchanges. For intercultural competence to be fostered in OIEs, intercultural sensitivity needs to be stimulated through explicit training (Bennett, 1993; Belz, 2002; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Michael Byram (1997) was one of the first researchers to define

intercultural competence. He argued that when people from other languages and/or cultures interact in a social context, they contribute with what they know about their own country, but also with what they know of people from other cultures. In this sense, both knowledge and attitude are important and they are affected by the processes of intercultural communication, which, in his words, refer to "the skills of interpretation and establishing relationships between aspects of the two cultures" and "the skills of discovery and interaction" (1997:33). In order to organise the intercultural dimension, which consists of sustaining interaction and building communication for the development of intercultural skills, we need to offer students the opportunity to build relationships and develop communicative skills through the exchange of information, and help them to reflect on different ways of doing things and to be capable of accepting different views and opinions.

Intercultural competence consists of a "set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, 2008:97). From this perspective, critical cultural competence is conceived as "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997:53). Fostering intercultural competence entails the development of an intercultural speaker, who "acquires a deeper understanding of the relationships of languages and cultures" (Wagner & Byram, 2017:2). Telecollaborative task design can help "learners in moving between cultures and reflecting on their own cultural positioning and the role of language and culture within it" (Liddicot & Scarino, 2013:112). It is apparent how the often-limited time and space of traditional face-to-face classes are insufficient, and therefore must be expanded through opening up and negotiating further spaces for intercultural and inter-linguistic interaction to foster intercultural competence.

An ever-increasing, although challenging, objective of telecollaborative projects is the development of intercultural 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). "There is a challenge […] about

how to make linguistic-competence oriented courses not only intercultural but also citizenship-oriented" (Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2017:237).

> It [Intercultural Citizenship] integrates the pillar of intercultural communicative competence from foreign language education with the emphasis on civic action in the community from citizenship education. (Porto, 2014: 5)

> The concept of "intercultural citizenship" (IC), which was introduced by Byram (2008), is postulated as a learning outcome to guide curriculum designers and teachers in school and higher education. […]. It is parallel to other concepts such as "global citizenship", "intercultural competence", or "cultural awareness", which are commonly used in education. (Wagner & Byram, 2017:1)[9]

A key dimension of Byram's recent construct is active citizenship which implies "being involved in the life of one's community, both local and national" (Wagner & Byram, 2017:3). In this light intercultural citizenship is instrumental in promoting the development of foreign language speaking citizens who are able to act in multilingual and transnational spaces effectively, 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, 2017:6)[10].

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[9] 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 activities outside school; making class-to-class links to compare and act on a topic in two or more countries (Byram, 2008:130).

[10] Wagner and Byram's most recent definition of intercultural citizenship follows: causing/facilitating intercultural citizenship experience, which includes activities of working with others to achieve an agreed end; analysis and reflection on the experience and on the possibility of further social and/or political activity; thereby creating learning that is

The increasingly intercultural citizenship-related dimension of online intercultural exchanges envisions learners as active global agents able to tackle world challenges (Leask, 2015:17). Here, telecollaborative tasks are expected to foster not only students' foreign language skills and intercultural awareness but also learners' engagements with global problems tailored to local contexts: "intercultural citizenship education […] mean[s] […] that learners would be encouraged to act together with others in the world and that those others would be in other countries and other languages. The purpose would be to address a common problem in the world" (Porto & Byram, 2015:24).

Intercultural citizenship "occurs when people who perceive themselves as having different cultural affiliations from one another interact and communicate, and then analyze and reflect on this experience and act on that reflection by engaging in civic or political activity" (Barrett, 2017:9). While engaged in intercultural citizenship-focused telecollaboration, partner groups analyse topics related to their own societies within an intercultural framework together; as a result of the co-participated analysis, each national group plans and carries out a form of civic action in its own community to foster social changes (Porto, Houghton & Byram, 2017:6): "[language] learners […] would decide on a project of significance in their community, share ideas and plans with each other, critically analyze the reasons/assumptions in their plans by comparison with the plans of the other group, carry out and report to each other their projects" (26).

2.3 *Tasks*

The adoption of an intercultural citizenship pedagogy is thus emerging as a new challenging dimension of telecollaborative instructional design. In this perspective, O'Dowd's "strong approach to telecollaborative task design" (2016:286) seems to cater to intercultural citizenship-driven virtual exchanges effectively:

cognitive, attitudinal, behavioural change in the individual; and a change in self-perception, in relationships with people of different social groups (3-4).

> […] tasks reflect themes of social justice and intercultural citizenship; tasks engage students in active collaboration together; tasks include reflection on the role of the medium in online communication; tasks include stages of cultural self-reflection and critical evaluation; tasks avoid stereotyping and forced culture clash. (286)

Three main types of tasks have been identified as the most widely used in telecollaboration: information exchange, which "involves learners providing their telecollaborative partners with information about their personal biographies, local schools or towns or aspects of their home cultures" (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009:175); comparison and analysis, which "requires learners not only to exchange information, but also to go a step further and carry out comparisons or critical analyses of cultural products from both cultures (e.g. books, surveys, films, newspaper articles)" (175); and collaboration and product creation, which "require […] learners not only to exchange and compare information but also to work together to produce a joint product or conclusion" (178). Thus, telecollaborative task macro-sequencing usually consists of three phases: an information exchange phase, an analysis and comparative phase, and a collaborative production phase (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009).

Task-based learning seems especially suitable to online intercultural exchanges. Tasks such as opinion exchange, decision making and problem solving can promote dialogical interaction focusing on real-world issues effectively, and constructing meaning socially. Language is the medium through which meaning construction and negotiation are mediated. As a result, foreign language learning and knowledge construction emerge as the product of dialogical interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Telecollaborative tasks generally involve different linguistic and cultural communities and thereby have a strong possibility of producing negotiation of meaning and providing opportunities for the exploration of different cultural perspectives. This makes them particularly suited to recent approaches to task-based learning, which include a focus on issues related to intercultural communication, such

as the development of empathy and tolerance and critical stance and the inclusion of information about the target culture (O'Dowd, &Ware, 2009:174-75).

3.   A Transnational Telecollaborative Project between the University of Virginia, Italian Studies and Liceo Scientifico Leonardo da Vinci, Milan

Our project has been to create virtual places as an integrated part of the educational programmes, existing in parallel to the space-time of traditional class-tuition, which students inhabit with a great degree of autonomy. In this article we will explore the work we have carried so far, and discuss future developments.

3.1   *Course Design: Developing Online Learning within the Blended Course*

A transnational, telecollaborative project, namely "Language Forward Initiative", will be developed over three years (Autumn 2018 - Spring 2021) at the University of Virginia, supported by a Jefferson Trust Award, awarded to the UVa Institute of World Languages in Spring 2018. Eleven language programmes, including Italian, are involved in this initiative and each programme has designed a unique virtual place to develop students' cultural and linguistic fluency[11]. In this context, we have designed a foreign language acquisition project based on a virtual exchange between Italian Studies, UVa, and an Italian upper-secondary school, the Liceo Scientifico Statale 'Leonardo da Vinci' in Milan.

     The project aims to incorporate Skype-mediated digital learning into the UVa Italian Studies syllabus at intermediate level in selected sections. In terms of course design, we have blended face-to-face

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[11]   The languages include Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Modern Hebrew, Russian, and Swahili. From Autumn 2019 also Portuguese will participate in this initiative. The Institute of World Languages Director is the grant recipient of this initiative and Francesca Calamita is the coordinator of the research group on the Language Forward Initiative. See also http://iwl.virginia.edu/ news/miao-fen-tseng-received-award-jefferson-trust-launch-language-forward-initiative-fall 2018.

foreign language lessons with the digital project. Thirty North American students studying Italian (2018 Fall ITAL 2010 Intermediate Italian I; 2019 Spring ITAL 2020 Intermediate Italian II) were partnered for two semesters with thirty Italian upper-secondary school students studying English to talk in dyads in desktop videoconferencing about selected conversational topics through a synchronous video communication tool (Skype). During the online intercultural exchanges, students worked in dyads, rarely in triads. The students met to talk 15/20 minutes in Italian and 15/20 minutes in English. Dialogical interaction, focused on contemporary Italian/North American cultural topics, was promoted through specific activities and tasks: information exchange, comparison and analysis, and collaboration and product creation (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009:175-78); opinion exchange, decision making and problem solving.

The first two weeks of the 15 teaching weeks were Skype-free, in order for students to familiarise themselves with the course. The project was divided into six Skype meetings for each semester. The creation of joint international online learning places offered students the opportunity to talk to distant native speakers of the target language of a similar age. Oral interaction was enhanced in a technology-mediated learning environment. Skype-mediated activities aimed to trigger students' language development through activities and tasks fostering output production and dialogical interaction in authentic, communicative language learning environments.

The original structure and scope of the course aimed to foster the development of foreign language skills but also of intercultural competence through the intercultural analysis of the cultural practices and values of the cultures of the groups involved in the virtual exchanges. The students were encouraged to articulate similarities and differences between Italian and North American cultures. While the interaction happened in the target language, the learners were put in the position of using and producing their knowledge in a meaningful context. In this way, learners were encouraged to think in a critical and comparative way, while practising the target language.

In order to organise this intercultural dimension, which consists of sustaining interaction and building communication for the development of intercultural skills, students were offered the

opportunity to build relationships and develop communicative skills through the exchange of information, and to reflect on different ways of doing things and on the acceptance of different views and opinions[12]. A critical thinking disposition allows students and teachers to reflect on messages and explore differences in view, and to understand controversies and debates. The foundation of the overall project is that of transporting the student in a virtual relational "counter-space" in which "learners examine phenomena and experience their own cultural situatedness while seeking to enter into the cultural worlds of others" (Scarino, 2014:391). In this digital space, students are enabled and encouraged to leave their ordinary learning environment and to enter, on a weekly basis, a new and far more personalised space for one-on-one, cross-cultural and inter-linguistic exchange.

In order to assist students in switching to the blended approach, we explained to them their role in the project and the pedagogical aims of the digital activities, and provided them with clear instructions and explicit guidance to the resources and activities. Before starting the Skype meetings students were given a list of weekly cultural topics, carefully sequenced, to be discussed during the online intercultural exchanges. The topics were chosen to foster students' reflections on culture-specific issues. In order to integrate face-to-face instructions and online learning effectively, the digital learning project provided North American and Italian students with the opportunity to converse about culture-specific topics interrelated with the topics dealt within face-to-face in-class instruction. The list of the conversational topics on contemporary world issues (distributed at the beginning of each semester and also available on the university and school platforms) included, but was not limited to: food and culture, migration and the Mediterranean crisis, environment and climate change, sustainability and best practices, gender equality and gender-inclusive language,

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[12] Fostering intercultural competence entails the development of an intercultural speaker, who "acquires a deeper understanding of the relationships of languages and cultures" (Wagner & Byram, 2017:2). Telecollaborative task design needs to promote intercultural competence, helping "learners in moving between cultures and reflecting on their own cultural positioning and the role of language and culture within it" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013:112).

work and career, intercultural competence and active citizenship in language learning.

The digital project was integrated into two sections of ITAL 2010 and 2020 of UVa Italian Studies and into the Italian school syllabi in terms of topics and assessment. Online intercultural exchanges are time consuming; to be sufficiently motivated to engage in the exchange it was important for learners to know, right from the beginning, that all the work done would be assessed and the assessment would be included in the course final grade (10% percentage of the course components and grading in Italy and in the United States).

Among the most practical aspects to be taken into account when developing the blend in the collaboration between a North American teacher and an Italian partner, there is the obvious matter of time zones. Handling time management in general and managing time for the various tasks in particular was fundamental in developing the project.

3.2   *Pre-online Intercultural Exchanges, Online Intercultural Exchanges and Post-Online Intercultural Exchanges*

Pre-online intercultural exchanges activities are very important as they guide students in the interaction. Brainstorming activities were employed in face-to-face in-class instruction which introduced the selected contemporary Italian/North American cultural topics before the Skype meetings. The objective was to activate the students' prior knowledge around each meeting's topic.

At this point indications as to how we intend to develop our project in the future will be provided, while discussing the phases we have carried out so far. In terms of future development of pre-online intercultural exchanges activities to be carried out by the UVa students on the University website Collab and by the Italian students on the school Moodle platform, we will insert the following activities: firstly, activities targeted to introduce key vocabulary items and/or concepts fundamental in discussing the conversational topics selected for the Skype meetings. These could be introduced by means of

matching activities implemented through digital noticeboards (Padlet). Students will be required to match vocabulary with definitions and images presented in sticky notes on a wall-like space. The objective is to introduce the key vocabulary items and concepts necessary for students to understand the topics to be discussed in the OIEs. Secondly, short authentic videos between five and ten minutes long, related to the topics to be discussed, could be made available on Collab website and on the school platform, and could help the students in the discussions. Students could be required to find material from the weeks preceding the desktop videoconferences, such as videos focusing on the topic selected for each lesson.

In the future we also intend to introduce ice-breaker activities before the first desktop video-conferencing meeting, to allow students to get to know each other. Both groups of participants could be asked to create five-minute videos in which each student has to introduce him/herself to the counterpart student (in North America or Italy) in the target language. The presentation through the production of a video, rather than in person or at the first Skype meeting, stimulates students' creativity and agency. The students could also be asked to create another short video (five minutes) aimed at introducing the other group to the geographical contexts, such as cities or regions, where they are based, their university or school.

For the online intercultural exchanges, students used Skype for their calls and chose their favorite day/time within the week, however the conversational topic assigned had to be discussed within the assigned week. Students' one-to-one meetings were conducted autonomously by the North American students in agreement with the Italian students.

The objectives are to promote the analysis of the topic of the lesson; to enhance dialogical interaction in the target language; to foster intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship. We assisted students during in-class face-to-face activities in considering the value systems underlying the Italian and North American cultural practices discussed in the weekly lessons. To foster intercultural competence in the digital learning environments we worked in class to "involve […] learners in moving between cultures and reflecting on their own cultural positioning and the role of language and culture

within it" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013:117). Students' voices, experiences, and background knowledge were central to discussing topics within an intercultural framework; students were encouraged to examine phenomena and experience their own cultural situatedness while seeking to enter into the cultural worlds of others. It requires an act of engagement in which learners compare their own cultural assumptions, expectations, practices and meanings with those of others, recognising that these are formed within a cultural context that is different from their own (Scarino, 2014:391).

"Video conferencing [was] seen as developing students' abilities to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and also elicit, through a face-to-face dialogue, the concepts and values which underlie their partners' behavior and their opinions" (O'Dowd, 2018:11). However, emails and WhatsApp were employed to both send and receive much more detailed information on the two cultures' products and practices as seen from the partners' perspective, and also to explore the conversational topics provided with further details.

North American and Italian students had the opportunity to discuss the weekly topics of their Skype call in class. Every week as a warm-up activity we approached one of the listed topics and worked on vocabulary to develop it. This allowed students to be prepared for the topic of their phone call and also to increase their vocabulary.

At the end of the semester students were asked to work in teams of two on a final presentation on their favourite topic discussed in the phone call and to upload the PowerPoint presentation onto the University and school platforms. Communication and collaboration among the students led to the creation of a product planned and realised by each dyad of students. During the Skype meetings, the students, in dyads, discussed and made plans to create a multimodal presentation on a topic they had selected from the lists provided at the beginning of the semester. The topics needed to be presented within an intercultural framework. Learners selected the topics and digital technologies they wanted to use to create their multimodal intercultural-driven artefacts. In this context, students experienced a high degree of autonomy and agency. The presentations created by Italian and North American students were uploaded to UVa Collab

and to the Italian school Moodle platform. All the learners involved in the online intercultural exchanges watched the presentations created by the other students and made available on the project website. The presentations were discussed in face-to-face lessons. The students' final presentations and the discussion (both digital on e-journals and face-to-face in class) were assessed. The final discussion of the content of the students' artefacts uploaded to Collab (UVa) and on a Moodle platform (Italy) was organised in the form of a group-to-group video conferencing session (the whole groups of students respectively in Italy and in the USA were involved) to discuss the students' artefacts uploaded to Collab (UVa) and on the Moodle platform (Italy). Learners asked questions on the other teams' presentations, answered questions about their own presentations, and managed turn-taking.

A challenging future objective within the three-year project (2018-2021) is the development of intercultural citizenship-focused exchanges to take students out of their comfort zone and engage them in real-world tasks. After focus group discussions with the students, we have identified three areas of interest to be developed in the coming years: social justice, organised crime and common good; environment, local sustainability and best practices; gender equality and gender-inclusive language.

As regards the post-OIE activities UVa students were asked to write entries in the e-journal *My Italian Diary* on Collab, and Italian students on their Moodle platform**.** *My Italian Diary* is a Wordpress platform, embedded in Collab, built throughout the semesters, and consists of a number of short entries, partially guided by the teachers. Through these e-journals, students shared their perceptions and reflections on the OIEs with their peers, focusing on issues such as topic engagement, intercultural competence/intercultural citizenship, language development.

Students' participation in the project was also assessed through their comments in face-to-face lessons. The students were additionally invited to reflect on their own learning process and outcomes (self-evaluation through online comments). The project also required an initial and a final reflection and a weekly report and assignment on the Skype meetings as a face-to-face class activity. On *My Italian*

Diary and on the Moodle platform, students reported their reflections on the project as well as on their final presentations. The e-journal allows students not only to upload their work and make it accessible to the teachers, but to see the progress made by their classmates, thus sharing their thoughts and entries with the rest of the class. On the respective platforms students were also asked to add six short entries to comment on their phone calls, this also included a description of their Italian friend in terms of studies, passions and things in common and a 50 words reflection on their conversation. The entries on *My Italian Diary* and on the school platform were the principal source of information in terms of students' self-evaluation and course evaluation. In face-to-face lessons the students were given instructions on how to answer questions online through the e-journals. Students were assessed on the basis of completion of the phone calls, their entries and final presentations on the university and school platforms, and their final reflection on the project with a rubric.

For the following phases of the project we have planned and organised an online self-evaluation questionnaire focusing on the various aspects and objectives of the lessons. The objective is to foster learners' self-assessment. A final online questionnaire for students on Google forms will be also formulated in the future: learners will evaluate the various aspects of the telecollaborative project with the aim of evaluating the effectiveness of and improving the format. We have realised that it would also be useful to gather students' perception in different phases of the project (before, during, and after). To this purpose, in future projects, the use of different tools (interviews, anonymous questionnaires, and check lists) to collect information may produce interesting results.

At the end of the first phase of our project (two North American semesters) we realised that in order to effectively organise the intercultural dimension, particular attention has to be dedicated to help our students to reflect on different perspectives on specific issues, and on the acceptance and expression of different views and opinions.

> The problem is that exposure to interaction of itself does
> not necessarily equate with intercultural learning. […].

> To be able to contribute to learning, the interaction must
> first become available in some way for students to reflect
> upon and to interpret. (Liddicot & Scarino, 2013:112)

We think that the alternation of Internet mediated sessions with face-to-face sessions has to be carefully planned and taken care of (O'Dowd, 2007:214). Before students engage online, they have to be prepared linguistically, technologically and inter-culturally to face the online interaction communication with virtual partners. Afterwards, they have to be guided in face-to-face lessons to reflect on the online interaction, individually or as a group. A phase of reflection and learning then prepares them for the next online encounter.

Overall, the telecollaborative project fostered access to intercultural interactions by means of a digitally enhanced blended course and achieved its main objectives. It aimed to increase the students' exposure to spoken Italian/English in a student-centred way; foster the development of students' speaking and interactional skills and their fluency in the target language; experience authentic language use; enable access to meaningful interactions; guarantee opportunities to practice communicative intercultural competence; foster the co-creation of digital learning experiences and knowledge in the target language; foster students' active learning, and increase their agency and autonomy (students have been engaged in meaningful interaction and constructed knowledge in the target language); build relationships and develop intercultural competence.

The analysis of student perceptions has shown positive results and learners' overall appreciation of the experience. From their comments on the courses' websites and in class, students noted linguistic and cultural improvements as the course's main benefit. With regards to the perception of linguistic improvement, students referred to the virtual exchange as mainly helping them with vocabulary, grammar, fluency and pronunciation. All the learners appreciated the opportunity to practice the target language. Some students underlined the importance of understanding its culture when learning a language. Student perceptions regarding the improvement of their language skills and intercultural competence through online intercultural exchanges are mostly positive: learning how to communicate

effectively with native speakers within an intercultural framework has emerged as one of the key assets of the virtual exchange.

However, feedback has also highlighted some critical issues. In this respect, students maintain that OIEs are often too time-consuming and that it is important to grant a good amount of credits for participating in the projects. Students suggested that discussion of the topics to be addressed in the Skype-mediated meeting should be improved in the culture seminars. Developing the discussion would assist with consolidating students' understanding of those topics. Students affirmed that the face-to-face culture seminar and the topics discussed during the Skype interaction should be more closely interrelated.

4.   Conclusion

In the trans-Atlantic telecollaboration, we are particularly interested in creating meaningful virtual learning environments, by turning the virtual spaces of online intercultural exchanges into hospitable learning places. The conceptualisations of a counter-space by Foucault, Lefebvre and Soja, and the relevance given, in Burbules' study, to the construction of learning spaces where teachers and learners interact, have made us focus our attention on the development of an alternative learning space, a "relational counter-space", expanded on and built by the social relations and spatial practices that unfold in and through that space. In the remaining part of our project we will continue trying to re-imagine virtual learning spaces as places for students to build relationships and work with others in meaningful interaction, and to take collective action in the world as active and engaged citizens, informed by critical inquiry and reflection.

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