System 64 (2017) 1–6

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

System

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/system

Editorial

Introduction to *system* special issue on telecollaboration

This Special Issue on Telecollaboration may be regarded variously as a late fruit of the INTENT project, or a harbinger of the Unicollaboration association, which has sprung out of it http://uni-collaboration.eu/. Of the seven articles in this issue of *System*, three were originally presented at the final conference of the INTENT project, held in Leon, Spain, on 12–14 February 2014. At the same time, of the eleven authors whose work is on display here, no fewer than six presented their work at the New Directions in Telecollaboration Research and Practice conference held at Trinity College Dublin on 21–23 April 2016, which marked the birth of Unicollaboration. Two further contributions are from scholars who stand outside this organization. Taken as a whole, the volume presents a broad spectrum of the research activity being conducted in telecollaboration today.

The choice of the term 'telecollaboration' rather than 'online intercultural exchange', or even 'virtual exchange' for the title of this special issue was largely accidental. However, it was also fortuitous in that most of the studies in the volume deal with aspects of teaching and learning in online exchanges (including questions of both learner and teacher online identity) rather than with the intercultural dimension of such exchanges. What do the articles collected here suggest about the state of telecollaboration in early 2017? Four of the seven articles in this issue deal with exchanges which make primary use of asynchronous text-based communication. However, three are devoted to the study of spoken synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), using webconferencing or videoconferencing. The focus in five of the seven articles is predominantly on linguistic analysis. But in two articles, which focus on learner identity and voice, authors embrace a more semiotic paradigm, most boldly and imaginatively in the final contribution to the issue, which contains a multimodal analysis of how the voices of early learners engaging in telecollaboration are constructed using language, image, objects and space. This may represent a measured, but discernible shift towards viewing online communication as a multidimensional form of meaning-making. What does it mean for telecollaboration as a medium for language learning? Here, there is perhaps a dilemma. Whereas early telecollaborative projects (especially those funded by the European Union, or the US Department of Education International Research and Studies Program) were multilingual and had the aim of maintaining linguistic pluralism, global English now casts its hegemonic shadow over telecollaboration, much as it dominates the language learning landscape today. No fewer than four of the studies in the volume deal with exchanges in which English was the medium of interaction. In three of them it is used as a *lingua franca*. Only two studies in the current issue report on bilingual language learning exchanges. The quality of the contributions gathered here is uniformly strong. Can the same be said for the linguistic ecology of the world in 2017?

1. Telecollaboration and teacher education

One positive trend in the field of telecollaboration is the increasing interest in its use as an arena for teacher development, particularly in online teaching skills. Three articles in the present issue address this. The first of them is *Task Design for Telecollaborative Exchanges: in Search of New Criteria* by Malgorzata Kurek and Andreas Müller-Hartmann. The authors deal with what must be a fundamental responsibility for teachers undertaking telecollaborative exchange projects, namely the design of online tasks (and of task sequences). In the past, would-be telecollaborators received little guidance or training in this kind of activity which, in some cases, led to misguided attempts to simply transfer tasks from face-to-face classrooms to the online context. Their efforts were doomed to inadequacy, since telecollaborative task design is complex and must take multiple, 'pedagogical, technical, linguistic and intercultural factors into account' (this issue). Accordingly, Kurek and Müller-Hartmann employ an exploratory practice approach (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) to examine the relationship between task evaluation criteria and telecollaborative task design. Taking as their point of departure Chapelle's (2001) CALL task criteria, they argue that, rather than being based on narrow SLA principles, online tasks require a more integrated, holistic, approach to design, taking into account pedagogical and technological, as well as linguistic, factors.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.01.007

To demonstrate this, they offer an account of a joint project bringing together 25 students of the MA Tesol at the Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg with 31 peers from Jan Dlugosz University in Czestochowa, the aim of which was to train participants to become autonomous task designers. Working in international teams, to guard against cultural bias, trainees took part in telecollaboration and were themselves both task designers and evaluators.

In relation to their project, Kurek and Müller-Hartmann ask three research questions:

1. To what extent does Chapelle's framework allow pre-service teachers to develop the central competence of task design in telecollaborative learning environments?
2. What evaluation criteria do teacher trainees employ when assessing the appropriateness of online tasks?
3. In which way does Chapelle's framework have to be extended to serve telecollaborative task design?

To answer these three questions, Kurek and Müller-Hartmann collect what they refer to as 'process' and 'product' data. Process data relates to student negotiation of task design and assessment, which takes place in discussion forums and wikis, while product data is represented by the actual tasks designed by student teams, by sequences of tasks placed on the Weebly website used in the project, and by students' evaluations of both of these.

In reply to research question one, Kurek and Müller-Hartmann find that 'the application of pedagogical criteria led to more elaborate, focussed, critical and with that qualitatively better evaluations than the use of Chapelle's categories'. In response to question two, they note that their trainees, identified as crucial such factors as 'clear task structure and adequate technology support', 'clarity of instructions' and 'tangibility of learning goals', these judgments being grounded in 'their own experience of telecollaborative training and the growing realization of the inherent complexity of this learning environment' (this issue). Finally, they propose a wholesale expansion of Chapelle's framework, integrating pedagogical and technical factors alongside her more narrowly linguistic criteria.

Kurek and Müller-Hartmann conclude by proposing what amounts to a three-level framework for the design and evaluation of telecollaborative tasks. In relation to learners and their aims they prioritize 'relevance to students' needs' and 'to the real world', 'communicative potential', 'openness and choice' and 'cognitive challenge'; with regard to the task itself they emphasize 'task clarity', 'balance between task demand and task support' and coherent 'task sequencing'; in respect of the online environment they identify 'affordances', 'choice' and 'authenticity' as guiding the task designer's activity (this issue).

Anna Turula is equally aware that task design is a key aspect of the teacher's responsibility in preparing for a telecollaborative exchange. However, in her chapter, *Teaching Presence in Telecollaboration; Keeping an Open Mind*, she focuses rather more on the role of the teacher during such an exchange. Inspired by Gert Biesta's (2012) ideas on restoring the concept of teaching to education, Turula reports on an action research study of the views of four groups of learners in respect of teaching presence in two separate telecollaborative exchanges. The exchanges in question took place between (a) learners from Pedagogical Universities in Cracow and Freiburg ($n = 28$) and (b) learners from Cracow and from the University of California Santa Barbara ($n = 23$).

Turula follows Anderson et al.,'s (2001) Community of Inquiry model, in defining teaching presence in terms of three elements: design; discourse facilitation; direct instruction. Turula's research aim is 'to examine how teaching presence is perceived by the different telecollaborating parties as well as how and to what extent student satisfaction with telecollaborative experience is a function of this presence' (this issue). To evaluate learners' perceptions Turula uses a 15-item questionnaire survey, responses to which are analyzed statistically. What the survey reveals is that the Cracow students evaluated teaching presence more positively in both exchanges than did their counterparts in Santa Barbara and particularly those in Freiburg.

These differences are partly explicable in socio-institutional terms. While learners in Cracow received credit (and presumably a grade) for their participation, those in Freiburg did not. For learners in Santa Barbara too the exchange represented only a minor part of their activities. This might presumably have had an impact on their motivation. Turula also argues that cultural differences may have played a role in shaping the difference in perceptions, suggesting that learners in Germany and the United States of America are more accustomed to exercising learner autonomy than are their Polish counterparts. This is clearly an exchange in which cultural judgments - perhaps even cultural stereotypes - appear to have played a role. It does seem however, that learners from Freiburg and Santa Barbara expressed regret at an absence of opportunities for informal exchange. For this reason the author concludes by suggesting that a more distributed approach to teaching presence would be appropriate for telecollaborative exchanges and that an appropriate balance might be struck between telic and atelic activities.

In her article, Turula laments the fact that learner's expectations in relation to teaching presence appear to have been 'set' at rather different levels in the classrooms of her collaborators. Perhaps this might have been avoided, had these individuals benefited from the kind of professional development opportunities described in Margarita Vinagre's article *Developing teachers' telecollaborative competences in online experiential learning*. Vinagre offers a case study of a group of nine teachers undertaking in-service professional development, by following a course in '*Intercultural Collaborative Exchanges in Virtual Environments*'. The course was delivered at distance by the *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia* (UNED) in Madrid and counted participants from Spain, Latin America and Cyprus. The course imparted conceptual knowledge, gleaned — at least partly - by critical evaluation of literature in the field. Vinagre also lays heavy stress on the need for procedural knowledge, which was developed by experiential modelling. Vinagre defines what she means by 'telecollaborative competences' using Hampel and Stickler's (2005) pyramid of online teaching skills (basic ICT competence; familiarity with specific software environments; online socialisation skills; the ability to teach communicatively online; creativity) as well as O'Dowd's (2015) taxonomy of telecollaborative teaching competences (organizational, pedagogical and digital competences,