



Open Intercultural Dialogue: educator perspectives

Francesca Helm, Sarah Guth

Università di Padova, Italy

francesca.helm@unipd.it, sarah.guth@unipd.it

While language educators are being encouraged to exploit the Web for authentic intercultural communication, research is showing that rather than bringing people from different backgrounds together, the Internet is offering a platform for people to express their opinions with those who share similar ideas. When intercultural contact does occur, it often appears to be highly conflictual. This paper begins with a brief discussion of the open Web and intercultural dialogue, followed by an overview of attitudes to conflict in education and foreign language teaching and learning. We then turn to our preliminary study of the perspectives of educators from European universities on disagreement and the discussion of sensitive topics in online intercultural exchange. Our data indicate a considerable divergence of views and a great need for dialogue amongst educators and further research into this topic.

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1 Introduction

Much has been written in the last few years about the power of Internet and social networks in bringing people together, particularly when organizing protests and rallying support for causes. Examples of this extend from the ousting of President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines in 2001, to the recent ‘Arab Spring’ (Schillinger, 2011), which led to rulers being forced from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. However, as scholars have pointed out (e.g. Yardi & Boyd, 2010), on the Internet people associate with other groups of people who are in many ways like themselves, or who share a common cause.

The fact that opportunities for intercultural communication have increased does not mean that people actively seek interaction with cultural ‘others’; Internet traffic within national borders is growing far more rapidly than cross-border communication (Hafez, 2007, p. 2). When Internet and social networks are used by members of different ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds for the discussion of intercultural issues there is little evidence of people exchanging views with mutual understanding and respect. For example, Hanna and de Nooy’s (2009) research on intercultural exchanges in public Internet discussion forums found «flaming and ranting - insults and vitriolic diatribe» (de Nooy, 2006, Intercultural exchanges p.3) to be much more prominent on the sites they explored than a respectful, dialogic exchange of views.

Given the growing trend of xenophobia in numerous European countries in the first years of the 21st century, the Council of Europe declared 2008 the Year of Intercultural Dialogue as a «forward looking model for managing cultural diversity» (Council of Europe, 2008, p.4). As part of this project, the EU published the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue¹, a result of consultations with many stakeholders held in 2007. The White Paper describes intercultural dialogue as:

a process that comprises an *open* and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others. (*Ibidem*. p.17)

Though the White Paper can be criticized for presenting certain Western European values as ‘universal’, it has made steps towards recognizing the complexity and fluidity of identity and culture, and also acknowledging issues of power and equality. These are issues which we feel need to be addressed in

¹ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf

foreign language education in what we have called *open intercultural dialogue* in the title of this paper. Confronting issues such as discrimination, poverty and exploitation as well as other sensitive topics like terrorism, politics and religion may lead to disagreement and even conflict. Clearly unabated conflict can take destructive forms; however, at least in ‘Western’ educational contexts there appears to be a general assumption that any form of conflict is negative and to be avoided. For example, in his study on textbooks used in American classrooms, James Loewen (1995) concluded that:

Most of us automatically shy away from conflict, and understandably so.

We particularly seek to avoid conflict in the classroom. One reason is habit: we are so accustomed to blandness that the textbook or teacher who brought real intellectual controversy into the classroom would strike us as a violation of polite rhetoric of classroom norms. (p. 25)

This highlights the link between what is assumed to be culturally accepted in our social lives and what is then considered to be socially accepted (or not) in educational contexts.

The avoidance of conflict is particularly relevant in the context of telecollaboration, or online intercultural exchange, which brings together students from two or more cultures to engage in intercultural dialogue (Dooly, 2008; O’Dowd, 2007), and characterizes what has been described as the «intercultural turn» (Thorne, 2010) in foreign language education. The educational objectives of such exchanges include but extend beyond, linguistic and pragmatic development of the sort that comprise the preponderant focus of most instructed L2 settings» (Thorne, 2010, p. 142). The concept of an intercultural ‘third space’ has developed (see e.g. Kramsch, 2009; Liaw, 2007; Dooly, 2011; Helm *et al.*, 2012) in which «relations of identity and power can be reframed and choices of language negotiated» (Kelly, 2009, p.1). Prescriptive models of communicative and sociocultural competence whereby learners succumb to what Block has described as «McCommunication» (2002) and are expected to assimilate ‘universal’ politeness conventions are being called into question.

Schneider and von der Emde (2006), for example, promote the notion of «productive conflict», arguing that:

language – any form of speech or writing – is not a self-unified system but the result and site of struggle, that is, conflict. [...] all discourses and utterances arise out of a fundamental engagement with an Other, whether that Other is someone from a different culture and with a different language, or someone from within the same culture and language. (p. 82)

They make the case for a dialogic approach to online intercultural exchange which involves ‘teaching the conflicts’ not by imparting strategies for avoiding conflict or ‘missing’ communication (Ware, 2005), but by giving learners the experience and conceptual skills for dealing with tensions first of all because they are likely to encounter these as they engage in intercultural communication but also because it can be seen as an intellectual enterprise.

In online intercultural exchanges (OIEs)², as in most language learning contexts, educators tend to choose ‘safe’ or neutral topics such as university life, home towns, food, music, and so on. Students engage in information exchange activities, make cultural comparisons and collaboratively create products. Few studies have reported OIEs where learners from different parts of the world engage in exploration and open discussion of sensitive or controversial topics such as terrorism, religion, exploitation or reasons for conflicts between cultures.

The aim of this paper is to explore the attitudes of educators towards the discussion of sensitive topics within the context of telecollaborative exchanges. First we describe our methodological approach, and then we present our findings. The paper ends with concluding remarks that highlight the need for more dialogue amongst educators and additional research.

2 Methodology

In order to explore the current state of open intercultural dialogue within the context of telecollaborative practice in Europe we established the following research questions:

- Do telecollaboration practitioners intentionally integrate sensitive topics into their exchanges or do they intentionally avoid them and why?
- How do telecollaboration practitioners feel about moments of disagreement and conflict during online intercultural exchange?

We differentiate between *disagreement*, which is seen as a divergence of opinion and *conflict* which is more confrontational and likely to occur around discussion of potentially sensitive issues such as religion, politics, history, and current affairs.

We used a mixed methods approach with a sequential design scenario involving the collection of first quantitative then qualitative data. As co-authors of a survey of European educators and students about OIE, carried out as part of the INTENT (Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education) project³, we included two items that sought to investigate

² OIE (online intercultural exchange), telecollaboration and telecollaborative exchange are used synonymously throughout the paper.

³ The INTENT project was funded by the LLP of the EU. The aim of the survey was to collect students’ and teachers’ views about the potential of Online Intercultural Exchange to help learn languages, intercultural communicative competence and

attitudes towards disagreement and the use of sensitive topics. The survey addressed both teachers who have implemented OIEs and those who have not. Complete responses were obtained from 210 educators in 24 European countries (Helm *et al.*, 2012).

As a follow-up to this survey, and in order to explore the divergent responses received, an additional questionnaire with 6 open questions was sent to the teachers with experience who had indicated they were willing to be contacted for further research. Responses were obtained from 11 educators in 9 different countries. In order to have further qualitative data, we also carried out face-to-face semi-structured interviews and group discussions with experienced telecollaboration practitioners and teachers interested in setting up telecollaboration projects. The qualitative data were then analysed using content and discourse analysis to identify trends and attitudes amongst teachers whose data were taken into consideration. The data gathered are summarized in the table below.

TABLE 1
Dataset

Data collection tool	No. of respondents
Quantitative survey questions	102 educators with experience of OIE 108 educators with no experience of OIE
Open questions (OQ)	11 educators with experience of OIE
Semi-structured interviews and group discussions (GD)	23 educators with and without experience of OIE

3 Findings

3.1 Responses to the surveys

Responses to the survey questions indicate that whilst a small majority of educators with experience of OIE (58%) had *not* felt it necessary to choose «topics for discussion that help to avoid any sort of disagreement or conflict of opinion», less than half (44%) had actively encouraged students to discuss ‘sensitive’ topics such as religion, racism or terrorism (see Figure 1). Responses from educators who had not implemented OIE were very similar, the main difference being the slightly greater degree of uncertainty (see Figure 2), which is understandable considering their lack of experience. These responses would seem to indicate that whilst many educators feel comfortable with some disagreement or divergence of opinion in online exchanges, they do not necessarily feel that students should be encouraged to address topics which may have greater potential for conflict.

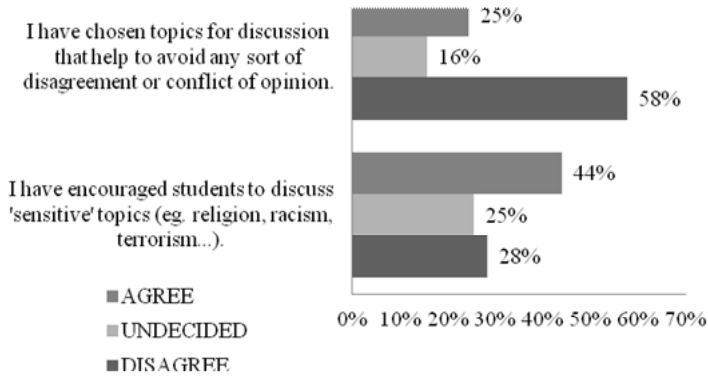


Fig. 1 - Responses to statements from educators who have implemented such telecollaborative exchanges.

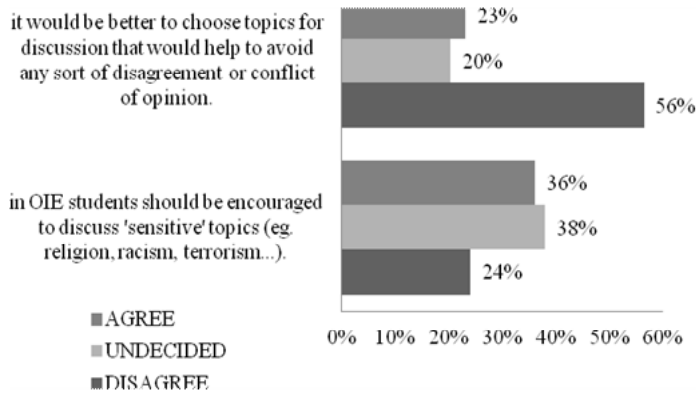


Fig. 2 - Responses to statements from educators who have not implemented telecollaborative exchanges.

Whilst this quantitative data is clearly insufficient to prove any hypothesis, the considerable divergence of views on conflict and sensitive topics may be seen to reflect the dichotomy between long-standing views on the importance of avoiding conflict in education, and the emergence of more critical, open and dialogic approaches to communication and education mentioned in the Introduction. Indeed it is worth noting that these were the only two questions in the entire survey that led to such an equal distribution of responses.

3.2 Findings from the qualitative data

The following discussion reports on findings from post-survey open questions sent to INTENT survey respondents who had experience with telecollaboration (coded as OQ) and transcriptions of group discussions (coded as GD) with both experienced and inexperienced telecollaboration practitioners.

In response to the open questions sent to respondents who had experience with OIE, only 2 out of the 11 educators reported instances of disagreement in their OIEs, but several felt that it had been deliberately avoided by students and teachers.

“Students tend to maintain telecollaboration somewhat superficial so as not to have strong disagreements and maintain the topics agreeable”. (OQ11)

“In my previous experiences with telecollaboration, I noticed that students and teachers avoid conflict and potential face threatening acts. I feel that an in depth conversation sometimes is missing because of this avoidance strategy” (OQ1)

Whilst both comments report conflict avoidance, there appears to be a different attitude. The use of ‘maintain’ and ‘agreeable’ in the first comment seem to indicate that the respondent sees superficial discussion as a form of positive self-regulation to avoid conflict in the context of telecollaboration. On the contrary, the second respondent feels that such avoidance strategies prevent more meaningful exchanges for students and her use of the word ‘missing’ indicates that she would like to see less superficial conversation.

Several educators reported that rather than disagreement they found that lack of commitment to telecollaboration projects was a major issue for them in OIEs:

“Disagreement is not the issue I have experienced at all even though I have closely watched out for it. The issue is much more that some student groups feel less inclined to take the exchange seriously, put the same effort into it”. (OQ10)

Lack of engagement, or different expectations in terms of commitment to telecollaboration exchanges have been widely reported on in the literature (see e.g. Ware, 2005) and will not be dealt with here. However, an interesting aspect that arose from our data in relation to student engagement was that several educators felt that it was important to have controversial topics on which students *would disagree* in order to promote participation and engagement, as the following remarks indicate:

“if we don’t do a controversial topic responses are very limited” (GD3)

“in our exchange with American students, the American students themselves could choose what topics to write about (texts which Italian students then had to translate) and when there was a controversial issue it was good because it started a discussion on why they had chosen that topic and it was those students who stayed in touch, established friendship and engaged in other activities” (GD1)
“I have always believed it is wrong to use topics that promote strong conflict of opinions. However, as a non-native speaker of English who rarely takes part in discussions using English, I have never spoken as much as I have in this discussion [on the use of sensitive topics in telecollaboration] because I feel so strongly about it.” (GD2)

This final comment seems to indicate that there is a link between language production and engagement in potentially controversial topics. However, some of the data implies that teachers make a distinction between controversial topics on which students feel free to express divergent opinions and issues on which students have strong emotional attachment and discussion of which educators fear may be difficult to deal with as they could lead to ‘uncomfortable’ conflict.

“The only bad situation I have had was working with US American-Italian students immediately after 9/11. The American students were not emotionally detached enough to be able to talk about it as a political event and we had to leave the topic.” (OQ2)

“If students feel very strongly about something, if it’s too close to them it’s going to get difficult, while if it’s a controversial topic but not too close to them it’s ok.” (GD3)

Most of the topics that educators reported they would avoid with certain groups of students were related to national/political issues, such as 9/11, and national/cultural identity, such as relations between China and Taiwan, and Catalonia and Spain, depending on the cultural background and location of the students and, in one case, government and institutional constraints⁴. Reasons given were that these topics would make their students feel uncomfortable and could generate emotional responses from students. Some educators reported that they feared losing control of the class, not being able to deal with the situation. Other educators were concerned that students would drop out of exchanges if they were required to engage in discussion about topics they were uncomfortable with.

Educators that believe in the educational potential of conflict also seem

⁴ In some countries, such as China, educational activities have to be approved of by Communist Party functionaries as well as academic boards.

to be aware of various contextual factors that are important to consider when addressing sensitive topics, e.g. how well the students had got to know one another, the relationship between the teachers, the quality of task design and tutoring and the extent of moderation and mediation provided.

“I would avoid topics that cause serious clashes as long as students don’t know each other well enough to be able to negotiate these clashes which is a long time and very hard to achieve in my experience.” (OQ7)

“Our focus is first upon building relationships, testing them through controversial debate may come later.” (OQ4)

“It all depends on the moderation and on the mediation provided. All potential troubling topics also have a great discussion and formative potential.” (OQ1)

Respondents to the post-survey open questions were also asked if they had had or would like to have specific training on dealing with conflict in telecollaboration. None had had formal training although some mentioned having learned through their reading and experience. One respondent explicitly stated that she didn’t feel training was necessary:

“No, I do not think I will need it. As I have said students tend to agree with their partners and keep conversations superficial.” (OQ11)

This response reflects the reality that in telecollaboration conflict is often avoided. However, during the group discussions there appeared to be general consensus amongst both experienced and inexperienced practitioners that training would be important, as reflected in the comment below.

“I never had such a training, but I participated in several telecollaboration projects. I think that information about how to mediate this episodes (instead of avoiding them) would be useful. I also think that information/training regarding the usefulness of conflict (as discursive motor) as well as regarding how to bring the conflict into the discursive surface instead of keeping hiding it would be of great help.” (OQ1)

Conclusions

Since, as stated in the introduction, open intercultural dialogue does not seem to naturally occur on Internet discussion forums and other social networks, the authors of this paper argue that one of the aims of telecollaboration should perhaps be to provide a ‘safe’ environment for such dialogue to take place between students from different cultural/national backgrounds. Dealing

with disagreement and conflict is an important life skill which should be considered both as part of intercultural competence and communication strategies. However, as this preliminary study has shown, this may take educators out of their comfort zones. There is a need for open dialogue amongst educators about how to promote deep learning and meaningful exchanges where learners can go beyond superficial interactions and engage in discussion about issues which matter to them. More research needs to be carried out in this area: first to explore the potential of conflict as a discursive motto, and secondly to understand if and what kind of training educators need to prepare for this type of activity.

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