

38 Fostering students' engagement with topical issues through different modes of online exchange

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Abstract

This paper reports on two distinct models of telecollaboration – the Soliya Connect Program, a synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) project, and the Intercultural Franco-Irish Exchange, an asynchronous CMC project – which seek to provide students with a learning space to promote a more politically engaged and reflective pedagogy (Kramsch, 2014). Using Herring's (2007) faceted classification for computer-mediated discourse, it specifies the models' inherent features and draws attention to a number of differentiating characteristics of the two projects. The analysis of qualitative data collected through students' diaries and feedback questionnaires shows that both modes of online dialogue encouraged students to engage with peers and content and enabled them to achieve intended learning outcomes.

Keywords: computer-mediated discourse, telecollaboration models, faceted classification scheme, interactions.

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1. Introduction

In a recent issue of the *Modern Language Journal* dedicated to foreign language teaching in an era of globalization, [Claire Kramersch \(2014\)](#) discusses how globalization has altered the contexts and conditions under which Foreign Languages (FLs) are taught, learned, and used. One of the points [Kramersch \(2014\)](#) makes in her introduction is that “[w]hile it is not the role of FL teachers to impose on their students their views on events, it is FL teachers’ responsibility to expose students to various perspectives (even controversial ones) and to help them discuss the points of view adopted by speakers, writers, and bloggers on these events” (p. 307). Online intercultural exchange can help us achieve this by facilitating learner interaction with peers who have different views on often sensitive key issues.

The two distinct virtual exchange programmes explored in this study are the Soliya Connect Program (SCP; www.soliya.net) a synchronous CMC project which has been described as a ‘dialogical’ model of telecollaboration, and the University of Limerick project (ULP; <http://www.uni-collaboration.eu/?q=node/429>), an asynchronous model which could be labelled as a ‘traditional’ model of telecollaboration. In spite of the frequently evoked dichotomy (or what some call ‘apparent incompatibility’) of spoken versus written mode of discourse, these two collaborative projects follow a common approach (i.e. give students access to an online platform for an authentic and meaningful dialogue with peers) and set similar educational learning goals (i.e. promote intercultural dialogue, develop critical thinking and encourage reflection). This prompted the present researchers’ interest in examining the two programmes more closely. They are also active practitioners, involved in the implementation and/or running of their respective project for nearly 10 years.

2. Methodology

[Herring \(2007\)](#) proposes a descriptive framework drawn from [Hymes’s \(1974\)](#) etic approach to spoken discourse classification (also known as [Hymes \(1974\)](#) SPEAKING taxonomy). This classification scheme for Computer Mediated

Discourse (CMD) analysis introduces two types of influence that can affect communication: ‘Medium’ (i.e. technological factors such as synchronicity, message transmission, size of message, etc.) and ‘Situation’ (i.e. social factors such as information about participants, their relationships to one another, their purposes for communicating, etc.). Herring (2007) explains that this division does not necessarily imply that the computer medium itself is a determining factor in online language use and that technological and social factors may or may not interact but, recognises in agreement with Androutsopoulos (2006) “the interplay of *particular* technological and social/contextual factors in the shaping of computer-mediated language practices” (p. 421, emphasis added), hence the need to separate the two types of factors for a better understanding of their specific impact on CMD (Herring, 2007). Each set of factors comprises an open-ended list of categories or ‘facets’ (see Appendix). Additional categories can be included if these have an impact on online discourse (Herring, 2007). To proceed with a systematic comparison of the two projects, ULP and SCP, Herring’s (2007) classification scheme seemed the most appropriate tool as it was intended to bring to light CMC features that directly influence language use in online interactions.

3. A comparative description

It is beyond the scope of this article to present in detail a classification of the two models of CMD, so attention will be drawn to their inherent features which contrast most. The main difference between the two projects regards synchronicity, with spoken and synchronous communication in the SCP which is thus expected to differ significantly from that in the asynchronous, written ULP due to access to “simultaneous feedback” (Herring, 2003, p. 618). However other affordances, such as ‘persistence of transcript’ and ‘availability of quoting previous message’ on the ULP forum come into play to compensate for the absence of this feature. One medium factor has been added to Herring’s (2007) original classification: *Platform*. The familiarity (and easy access) to the online forum platform for the ULP group compared to the novelty of the SCP real-time video-conference (with occasionally poor

internet connection) is likely to have an effect on students' CMD. Interestingly, while the 'channels of communication' on the SCP are predominantly spoken, participants welcome the support of text chat (drafted by the group facilitator). Conversely, participants in the ULP often add audio-visual material – related to the discussion topic – to their written posts.

Turning to the second set, the situation factors, the two CMC modes exhibit opposite characteristics in most categories except 'purpose' (of communication) and also to an extent, 'topic of discussion'. Starting with the facet 'participation structure', the divergence is quite marked: in the SCP small group (or 'many to many') exchanges can at times result in imbalanced participation compared to the one to one, symmetrical and fairly even exchange in the ULP; besides, for the SCP, the video-conference sessions are limited to two hours weekly while the ULP participants can rely on a 24 hour open access data and forum.

Looking at another dimension, 'norms of organisation', both models took a prescriptive approach to 'task and activities' to a stronger (SCP) or lesser (ULP) degree. 'Task sequencing' was perceived as essential in the two models to create a safe space for true dialogue to take place as both projects address challenging 'topics' involving controversial social issues (ULP) or sensitive cultural issues (SCP). The striking difference is the presence of a trained facilitator in the SCP interactions who is expected to lead the dialogue sessions, ensure all participants can be heard, and foster depth of discussion. In contrast, the ULP is organised in dyads with no teacher presence/intervention, each partner being an expert on his or her own country/culture. Another potentially significant situational factor has been added: *Design* (of curriculum/task). In the SCP, students from universities throughout the Middle East, North Africa, United States, and Europe follow a shared preset 'online curriculum' associated with the project, whereas the ULP fits in a teacher-designed fourth year course. This may have an impact initially on participants' attitude towards the online task in the SCP, as adjusting to unfamiliar settings as well as new curriculum can be a bit overwhelming for some.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This brief comparative description of the two CMC models has shown that while technical affordances influence students' language use, they have to be examined in relation to the situational factors, as these also shape the interaction in the online exchange. It would be easy to assume that the projects' differences found in the two sets of factors will have some bearing on students' level of engagement and will somehow accentuate the initial synchronicity divide between the two CMC models.

Yet reflecting on their online learning experience, some of the participants made very similar, almost interchangeable comments, particularly as regards their motivation to post a message or participate in sessions regularly. The following comments obtained from learner diaries and questionnaires exemplify this:

“The *discussions* and the *interaction* were so rich that it almost seemed that 2hrs a week was not enough to cover what we had to give [SCP]; It was a very *interactive* experience. I looked forward to hearing from my partner and having an interesting *conversation* with her [ULP]” (emphasis added).

It is also worth mentioning that students in both projects made reference to project goals such as greater awareness and/or accepting their own as well as others' perspectives:

“If we didn't agree we just made room to an open minded conversation, accepting all arguments [ULP]; It's important to put ourselves in another person's shoes in order to really understand them [SCP]”.

Though we distinguish between written and spoken, synchronous and asynchronous CMC modes, these distinctions become increasingly blurred as CMC has become multimodal with audio-video conferencing including text,

and text-based forums including hyperlinks to video. Furthermore, sustained engagement in synchronous audio-video sessions over a period of weeks can take on the form of an extended conversation, in a similar way to an asynchronous forum threaded discussion lasting up to 8 weeks. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, provisional findings would appear to lend support to Herring’s (2011) assertion that CMC is ‘conversation’.

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Appendix

Medium and Situation factors from Herring’s faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. <http://www.languageatinternet.org/articles/2007/761>

Table 1. Medium factors (Herring, 2007)

M1	Synchronicity
M2	Message transmission (1-way vs 2-way)
M3	Persistence of transcript
M4	Size of message buffer
M5	Channels of communication

M6	Anonymous messaging
M7	Private messaging
M8	Filtering
M9	Quoting
M10	Message format

Table 2. Situation factors (Herring, 2007)

S1	Participation structure	One-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many Public/private Degree of anonymity/pseudonymity Group size; number of active participants Amount, rate, and balance of participation
S2	Participant characteristics	Demographics: gender, age, occupation, etc. Proficiency: with language/computers/CMC Experience: with addressee/group/topic Role/status: in 'real life'; of online personae Pre-existing sociocultural knowledge and interactional norms Attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and motivations
S3	Purpose	Of group, e.g. professional, social, fantasy/ role-playing, aesthetic, experimental Goal of interaction, e.g. get information, negotiate consensus, develop professional/social relationships, impress/entertain others, have fun
S4	Topic or Theme	Of group, e.g. politics, linguistics, feminism, soap operas, sex, science fiction, South Asian culture, medieval times, pubs Of exchanges, e.g. the war in Iraq, pro-drop languages, the project budget, gay sex, vacation plans, personal information about participation, meta-discourse about CMC
S5	Tone	Serious/playful Formal/casual Contentious/friendly Cooperative/sarcastic, etc.
S6	Activity	E.g. debate, job announcement, information exchange, phatic exchange, problem solving, exchange of insults, joking exchange, game, theatrical performance, flirtation, virtual sex
S7	Norms	Of organization Of social appropriateness Of language
S8	Code	Language, language variety Font/writing system

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New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education
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