Chapter 8
The Hemispheres Connection

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ABSTRACT

In the chapter, the authors present the organization of two telecollaborative projects involving Brazilian and international students—the Rio-Warsaw Connection and the Natal-Davis Connection—and how they merged to become an even bigger project, connecting students across four continents: The Hemispheres Connection. They hope that the narrative of their specific experiences will add to the growing literature on telecollaborations and that it will offer guidance and encouragement to those considering embarking on a similar adventure.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, as has been widely observed, the world has changed dramatically, largely owing to the revolutions in communication and transportation. Travel from one place to another has become ever faster and more accessible, while near instantaneous messaging has become widely available. The world, consequently, has shrunk. The speed with which information now circulates on information superhighways (Bauman, 2007) has been further enhanced by the growth of the Internet, a facility that extends the material world into a virtual universe and allows people to experience new sociocultural modes of life in ways that we are still trying to understand (cf. Bloomaert & Rampton, 2011). The fact is that the youngest amongst us can hardly imagine living without gadgets, apps, likes and shares. It is already

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difficult to remember a time when our lists of daily activities were not accompanied by hashtags. In short, technology has changed the way we travel, invest our money, learn, and establish relationships with each other.

The technological revolution we have witnessed has coincided with a remarkable growth in the populational movements around the world. Consequently, besides the circulation of information, we are also witnessing the mass movement of people on a global scale. According to Geertz (2001), this movement has resulted in a ‘shuffling’ process that has softened social boundaries and now allows people from different cultural backgrounds to share the same space. Thus, given that the experience of cultural diversity is practically unavoidable, be it facilitated virtually or face-to-face, intercultural communication has become a central concern.

Piller (2011, p. 1) states that intercultural communication is accompanied by a series of challenges, for instance: a) the linguistic challenge embedded in the language learning process; b) the discursive challenge of dealing with stereotypes and; c) the social challenge of inclusion and justice. We follow Piller in assuming that dialogue is an appropriate way to understand differences, even if some others insist that the best way to deal with them is (re)building walls. Although we know that engagement in dialogue depends on individual efforts, in general, we argue that the school is the institution with the power to develop in learners, in an organized and systematic way, the necessary attitudes and critical awareness to participate in intercultural dialogue and to question those one-dimensional policies that might oppose it.

In this educational scenario, we consider that the teaching of foreign languages plays an important role because, as confirmed by official documents, such as the Brazilian National Curriculum Guidelines (Brazil’s Ministry of Education, 2006) and the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). These and other curriculum guidelines offer a perspective that integrates language and culture, and encourages language students to seek out intercultural experiences, that is, to engage actively with aspects from other cultures and gain access to ways of thinking and acting that differ from their own. With the use of the Internet as a pedagogical tool, this access becomes much more viable. In that regard, many educators, like Corbett (2010, p. 11), for example, have observed that “computer-mediated communication has given a whole new impetus to the integration of culture-learning with language learning”.

It is precisely in this context that we recognize the relevance of projects that focus on telecollaborations between geographically and culturally distant people, projects that are often dubbed ‘online intercultural exchanges’ (e.g. O’Dowd 2011). In the present chapter we present the organization of two telecollaborative projects involving Brazilian and international students – the Rio-Warsaw Connection and the Natal-Davis Connection – and how they merged to become an even bigger project,