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Research perspectives on virtual intercultural exchange in language education

Richard Kern, Anthony J. Liddicoat and Geneviève Zarate

Question 1. How would you define these new third spaces? How are “virtual” intercultural exchanges different from other kinds of exchange?

Richard Kern

The Oxford English Dictionary defines virtual in the realm of computing as “not physically present as such but made by software to appear to be so from the point of view of a program or user.” Based on this definition, we can infer that practices of virtual intercultural exchange are practices that do not involve physical presence but produce the effect of presence, and that permit intercultural learning.

Online spaces of virtual intercultural exchange are relational spaces in which participants from different cultures meet, interact, and learn about one another. They are first and foremost mediated spaces. The factors that mediate them include at least the following:

- Language (and the degree to which it is familiar to the participants).
- Culture (one's own? someone else's? multiple? hybrid? medium-specific?).
- Genre (familiar? unfamiliar? seemingly familiar but really unfamiliar because of cultural differences?).
- The spatial and temporal setting (is it different for the respective participants?).
- The social setting (the respective roles of participants, their relative status and power, the purpose and goals of the interaction and who determines them, the stakes of participation, grades, etc.).
- The technical interface (the available modes of expression and the nature of the channels employed, users’ degree of familiarity with its features and use).
- Intersubjectivity (the degree of mutual, shared understanding among the participants related to all of these preceding factors).

To show how complicated these mediations can be, let's consider spatial and temporal setting. In virtual intercultural exchanges, participants are operating in at least two settings at once: (1) the physical here and now of the place where they are, perhaps alone, perhaps with others around them, which is inevitably a different space from that of their interlocutor; (2) the virtual here/there and now (when synchronous) or then (when asynchronous), mediated by images on a screen and sounds from a speaker, a setting that is shaped by the participants’ discourse and the interface they are using. These two settings interact and sometimes compete (“was that remark addressed to me or someone there with you?”) and can lead to misunderstandings (Kern

& Develotte, 2018). And technological constraints may be subtle. In the case of videoconferencing, for example, participants think of their interaction as occurring in real time, like face-to-face interaction, yet the audio and visual signals they perceive are always slightly delayed due to transmission distance and bandwidth limitations. Most often, this delay is inconsequential, but sometimes it can cause confusion: one might wonder if one's interlocutor's smile, gesture, or facial expression is in response to what one is saying right now or in response to what one said a moment ago. The setting can be further complexified when a user has multiple windows open, with different interactions happening in each one (and presumably without any of his multiple interlocutors knowing that they are not getting full attention all the time). Unlike presence in face-to-face situations, virtual "presence" is not tied to physical place and can be distributed in both time (synchronous and asynchronous) and space (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many configurations). Furthermore, "presence" can be simulated, creating the impression that one is online, when one is really not (as when one turns on automatic away-messaging or deploys interactive bots). Virtual exchange is usually not private, although it may seem so to participants. In social media platforms, participants' discourse may be in fact be providing goods (in the form of "content") to the company sponsoring the platform, which may be collecting information on the participants in order to target them for advertising or to attract new users.

When people communicate online, they often have the impression of being in co-presence with one another, especially if they are communicating via videoconferencing or some form of synchronous writing. But it is a different kind of co-presence and mediated in different ways. Perception and representations of the other are constructed and constrained through resources of the screen and keyboard. Some researchers have argued that communication can become "hyperpersonal" (Walther, 1996) – that is, more intense and more addictive than normal face-to-face communication – when exaggerations heighten people's affective/emotional responses to one other. This is related to what Rouquette (2008) calls "extimacy" – the overt sharing of thoughts or feelings (often with strangers) that would normally be considered private. All of this makes it difficult to know what is "real" or "true" versus what is "virtual" or "feigned" in online interactions. However, it must also be recognised that the same question may be raised with respect to face-to-face interactions.

Research on intercultural exchanges has shown that merely providing opportunities for online contact with members of other cultures does not necessarily promote intercultural learning (Belz, 2002; Ippolito, 2007; O'Dowd, 2003). One reason is that all technologies are embedded in cultural and linguistic practices (Bell, 2006), meaning that a given technological artefact can be used in radically different ways, and for different purposes by different groups of people. The kinds of experiences learners have with electronic communication shape their expectations as well as their language use with foreign partner classes (Helm & Guth, 2016; Thorne, 2016). However, to further complicate things, culture in digitally mediated environments is hybridised in the sense that people's national and regional affiliations intersect with the conventional practices, mores, and genres established within the online user group, often influenced by the nature of the medium (i.e. "chat" culture is different from "e-mail" culture is different from "forum" culture is different from "game" culture). As Hanna and de Nooy (2009) argue, the Internet is neither culturally transparent and technology-driven nor culture-driven and technology-transparent. Rather, cultural conventions interact with the technological medium and appear online in modified form (p. 27).

Online intercultural exchanges make it possible for language learners to have personal encounters that lend themselves to fruitful reflection and thereby serve intercultural learning.

But this ideal outcome will emerge not from the technology per se, but rather from the thoughtfulness of the people who act, react, and reflect on the communicative events mediated by the technology.

Anthony Liddicoat

Richard Kern has argued that virtual intercultural exchanges are mediated exchanges and opens up the idea of mediation beyond their being mediated simply because they involve a medium, that is, a technologised channel through which interaction occurs. Mediation in any context is complex and multivalent and if the idea of mediated spaces is reduced to the presence of a mediating channel, then much of the complexity of virtual exchanges as mediated spaces risks being lost.

The dimensions that Kern adds to the mediated nature of technological spaces show insights into the nature of the complexity of mediation in such spaces. In this context, Vygotsky's (1934/2005) understanding of mediation as the intentional interjection of interpretational tools between experiences of the world and understandings provides a useful way of thinking about virtual spaces of interaction. For Vygotsky, symbolic tools such as language act as "intermediaries" (Russian посредники) that work to give sense to experience and shape understanding of them. In virtual exchanges, the symbolic systems that participants draw on are essentially multimodal and participation in these exchanges is not simply through language but involves a complex multimodal signifying system that is a constituent part of the interaction (Liddicoat, 2011). This multimodality has often not been given due recognition when thinking about virtual exchanges for language learning as the preparation for participation, and the focus of learning from it, has been placed narrowly on language. In some cases, teaching and learning may add culture as a further set of signifying practices (e.g. Belz, 2007), but true multimodality has been much less central to ways of thinking about the affordances of technological media or the requirements for participation. Virtual exchanges take place in contexts where language, culture, image, sound, embodied actions, etc. (Mondada, 2015), both independently and in interaction with each other, are all constituent parts of the meanings that are being created, communicated, and interpreted by participants. Thus, understanding such spaces involves not only knowing what modalities are present in the space, but how each modality creates the meanings that occur in it; that is, each modality is an "intermediary" that constructs interpretations and engagement in the space and provides particular affordances for and constraints on meaning-making and interpretation for the participants involved. In addition, modalities themselves have semiotic properties that contribute to how they are understood in the interaction and thus how the interaction unfolds through them.

Participation in such spaces requires more than linguistic capabilities in the language(s) used in exchanges; it requires symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2006, 2011). Kramsch defines symbolic competence in terms of the ability to use, interpret, and manipulate symbolic systems and semiotic practices to position oneself so as to benefit in terms of their symbolic power. In engaging in virtual spaces, participants need to be able to understand the signifying practices present in those spaces, and not just understand them but to use them to realise their social and self-representational goals in the interaction. This involves more than knowing about signs and how they are deployed. It involves access to a repertoire of (multimodal) symbolic practices that allow for participation in sociality and understanding of the social and interpersonal affordances of those practices when they are deployed in the interaction (Swidler, 1986). In intercultural exchanges, it also involves awareness of the possible laminations of meanings that are present in the interactional space and the similarities and differences in the affordances of symbolic practices for self and others in the interaction.

Because meaning-making and interpretation in intercultural virtual exchanges are complex, there is a further way of thinking about mediation that is relevant in such spaces. This is the idea of mediation as an action of a social actor intervene in meaning-making practices to develop shared understanding between participants (Gohard-Radenkovic, Lussier, Penz, & Zarate, 2004). The complex, multimodal signifying practices of virtual exchanges reveal clearly that meaning-making and interpretation are not transparent processes and that there are always multiple possible understandings of what is being communicated between participants. This means that participants need to be able to deal with meaning, be aware of the meanings that are present in interaction, and be able to intervene in meaning-making practices where meaning-making and interpretation require negotiation or clarification. This too is a manifestation of symbolic competence and involves a meta-level of communicative action in which participants need to act on meanings and their communicative potentials rather than simply communicate meanings.

To return to the starting question, these new third spaces are spaces in which multimodality requires the development of more extended capabilities in meaning-making and interpretation and in which multiple forms of mediation are co-present in the process of communication. At one level, this is true of all complex human social interaction and so virtual spaces are different more in degree than in nature from other forms of communication.

Geneviève Zarate[1]

It seems imperative to me to examine, starting perhaps from the introductory definition provided by R. Kern ("not physically present as such but made by software to appear to be so"), the relationship between "virtual" and "real" from the point of view of the description and interpretation of a socially observable reality. Following the basic principles of sociology, let us say that the relationship to the virtual world generates its own social practices, meaning that they "exist" in the sense that they are lived experiences which can be described in the experiences of social actors. But from the point of view of knowledge and a scientific description of it, the virtual world does not generate its own descriptive laws that would exempt it from a critical perspective, as defined by the rules of sociology.

Today's societies, all of them, to varying degrees, are experiencing a shift in the distinction between "real" and "virtual." While this blurring of boundaries is not new (Plato, late 5th century BC/1965), Literature, Image and, more generally, the Arts influenced by an interpretation that has changed throughout the history of aesthetics of μίμησις (mimesis), as well as Politics and Religion, have all benefited, and these variations in meaning have now taken over public space on a scale and with a speed never before seen. It is no longer only the recognised makers of these virtual worlds that control these boundaries, but rather individuals and groups, which are sometimes difficult to identify, that often loudly dictate the course of current events and the sound state of democracy in the world by playing with and moving the borders between "real" and "non-real."

The concept of the "third space," which in our field dates back to the 80s and 90s, refers to and expresses the production of critical thought starting from superficial prejudices about the Other and then questioning the construction of an opinion by filtering it through a personal, social story. The "third space" is the incarnation of Socratic method and thought, revived in Europe by the Enlightenment philosophers, made up of a back and forth between hypotheses and observed facts, which includes doubt as a necessary step in the creation of a discourse on reality

and gives the real world a consistency that frees it from spontaneous opinions (Kelly, Elliot, & Fant, 2001; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat, & Crozet, 1999).

An “intercultural virtual space” left in the hands of platforms answering only to the dogma of the liberal economy is filled with thundering discourse and all-or-nothing, cursory, verbal tirades (sometimes limited to 280 characters!) that are instantly shared across borders. Under those conditions, a space like this cannot guarantee carefully constructed thought. What control do educators have over these pretences that systematically confound truth and doubt and misuse observations?

A created virtual space can be understood as “augmented reality.” This is a trap of words that magically transforms the “virtual” into a “reality” that is worth more than observable reality (Plato, late 5th century BC/1969)! A virtual space that highlights the fun side of its learning mission runs the risk of divesting itself of all the social density inherent in the Other's gaze. The definition chosen at the outset (“to appear to be so”) is lacking. It establishes no real barriers to the abuses of dominant use. It does not guarantee an educational space its prerogatives: shaping responsible citizens who are both open to the world and able to take a step back when interpreting it.

It is impossible to deny or stem the technological shift that the digital world affords us. We should not waste our strength in these rear-guard struggles, but we must not underestimate the challenges technology represents to interpreting otherness in this time when cybermodernity imposes its own codes.

Question 2. Nowadays there are multiple practices of virtual intercultural exchange throughout the world in language teaching communities. To what extent are these practices intercultural?

Anthony Liddicoat

At one level, this would appear to be a relatively straight-forward question. Virtual intercultural exchange could be considered an intercultural practice as it involves communication between people from different cultures. However, this question is actually much more complex than it initially appears as the idea of “intercultural practices” is subject to many interpretations. The initial obvious interpretation, that any contact between people from different cultures must be intercultural, is overly simplistic and can obscure much of what is actually involved in engaging with linguistically and culturally diverse others. A much more satisfying way of framing the question is to ask “to what extent do participants in such interactions employ intercultural practices?” When the question is framed in this way then the answer is one that needs to be answered empirically by observing the specifics of individual interactions.

It is possible that participants may approach the interaction with linguistically and culturally diverse others from a perspective in which the cultures and cultural identities are treated as fixed, typically nation-based, sets of attributes and characteristics, and the participants are in some sense representatives of their specific national cultures. Participants can be seen to adopt a culturalist (Bayart, 2002) perspective, in which cultures are seen as collections of timeless, stable representations, with clear boundaries, and as independent of political construction. It is a view in which diversity, variability, and personal agency are elided and so “misrepresents what is frequently a contested activity as if it were slavishly followed by all those associated with particular cultural groups” (Phillips, 2010, p. 5). In such interactions, cultures become

ways of stereotyping individuals and these stereotypes can shape how participants and their contributions are understood. Interactions in which such a perspective is at work would be intercultural only in the most superficial sense and participants' use of intercultural practices may be quite minimal.

For an interaction to be considered to draw on intercultural practices, it would require a more critical engagement with the place of language and culture in the interaction than is found in a culturalist view. Such an engagement would entail a developing understanding of the exchange as being one between individuals who are shaped by experiences of using particular linguistic and cultural practices to achieve social goals in interaction, and who have different repertoires of, and associations with these practices (Swidler, 1986). Thus, culture is not treated as something that pre-establishes the interaction but rather as something participants draw on in different ways to constitute it and to create local practices of communication in interaction with each other. There is an inherent reciprocity involved in intercultural practices; an awareness that both self and other draw on differing linguistic and cultural repertoires in their interaction and how the enculturation of all participants as communicators is consequential for how the interaction unfolds.

An intercultural interaction requires an awareness of meaning making and interpretation as the fundamental issue involved in communication. Understanding is not the automatic outcome of communication, even in contexts of shared languages and cultures, as all processes of interpretation are shaped by the interpreters' prior experiences of creating and interpreting meanings (Gadamer, 2011). Achieving mutual understanding is a dialogic process of coming to understand that involves a "fusion of horizons" between participants in which the desired result is not so much the transmission of a "correct" meaning, as the achievement of a shared perspective on the meaning and how it has been made. Because interpretations are the result of personal experiences, they are inherently plural. Diversity of interpretation is thus not viewed as "noise" in the communication, but as a natural and creative process of mutual engagement. Intercultural practices of interpretation view meaning as always potentially plural, and participants look for and accept such plurality as central to their mutual engagement. Intercultural practices thus entail the presence of "symbolic competence" (Kramsch, 2006) which involves not just capabilities for communication, but also recognition of the processes of meaning-making and the symbolic nature of language use and the ability to use this recognition to achieve interpersonal goals.

A further feature of intercultural interaction would be the presence of mediation as a communicative practice. Mediation does not simply mean a process of resolving disputes over meaning when they occur, but rather a more encompassing process of taking positions between languages and cultures to facilitate communication and to develop knowledge of self and other and the meanings they create and understand in interaction. Thus, an interaction characterised by intercultural practices would entail an assumption of responsibility by participants for ensuring mutual comprehension and engaging with the diversities of meaning making in productive ways.

Geneviève Zarate

Social sciences developed methodological tools to respond to the questions of the 20th century, a time when the imagined Other was necessarily described in terms of exoticness and geographic distance. The post-World War II period reversed that methodology for how the Other was viewed and banished racism from scientific thought. Our view of the Other must

now question how it is constructed in order to be of service to what it describes and guard against the historical excesses of Ethnology (Lévi-Strauss, 1983).

Ethnology in the 20th century perfected specific tools: the ethnologist's "field" was used throughout a stay in a place, and scholarly, bookish studies that resulted from observation in the previous century were disposed of. "Direct observation" became the prerequisite for the credible application of social sciences. The observation over the long term was embodied in the "field journal" (Malinowski, 1967). The ethnologist built an entire career on one or two clearly identified fields (for example, Lévi-Strauss and the Nambikwara and Bororos tribes of Mato Grosso in Brazil; Marcel Griaule and the Dogon in Mali and Burkina Faso). The long period of observation of a single social entity was the guarantor of the credibility of a description. Beginning in the 70s, ethnologists laid claim to the study of modern-day, Western society and honed methodology that raised questions about a familiar gaze: under what conditions does this gaze escape the trap of familiarity, of quotidian banality? The initial process was therefore constructed based on personal, progressive involvement in the field. This "participatory observation" required the ethnologist to build social relationships with those being observed, with all the inherent risks of blinding empathy, rejection or exclusions, and requiring involvement and distancing for a credible description.
What remains of this methodology in approaching virtual reality? Almost nothing! Whole swathes of these methodologies are ignored because the deceptive lure of "augmented reality" is that it produces its own descriptive laws. Any teacher who has worked on creating a tool using these immersive technologies has measured, based merely on clear-minded thinking, the extent to which the graphic electronic applications impose their own limits on the project itself when humans become avatars or holograms.

Certainly, these technologies are showing up in education after having proven themselves in other fields: architects, doctors, estate agents, and e-commerce salespeople have enjoyed these innovations which have transformed their fields. No one would complain about having a 3D reconstruction of inaccessible or damaged archaeological sites. Artificial intelligence and augmented reality are not in and of themselves a barrier to understanding the real world. But the educational sector currently overlaps in a troubling way with entertainment, sometimes termed edutainment in English, a hard-to-resist mirror for this generation of pupils. Add to that the impressive effectiveness of machine translation, Google Translate for example, impressive because instantaneous, and dictated by algorithms that obscure the linguistic choices imposed by technological limits.

A discussion cannot claim to be "intercultural" just because it is a series of interactions between avatars and/or participants of different nationalities, which places the emphasis solely on national belonging and overestimates the impact of interpretation. Communication must not be understood as solely individual, because every person must come to be aware, even indirectly, of the way there are socialised and of their social belonging. The exchange must gradually guide discussants' interpretation beyond those two most obvious dimensions – nationality, individuality – and call into question the meaning of a social practice, even if that means leaving aside interpretation of it, without giving in to facile relativistic conclusions, accepting uncertainty (Zarate, 1993; Zarate, 2003). A tool designed to encourage reflection on an intercultural exchange follows a progression and explicitly serves that aim. This progression has as its goal fuelling and enriching the process of interpretation: the concepts of exoticism, cultural misunderstandings, intercultural mediation, and important oppositions (for example, between nationalism and patriotism) dictate its architecture and design.

The virtual kicks off this reflection, it does not provide its conclusions. Intercultural exchange cannot be reduced to setting up an exchange between partners living in different countries; it becomes credible when it is part of a long-term process and resists the temptations of a boring interaction permeated by platitudes. If it is a way into taking a position, if it shifts the interlocutors' certainties, helps them spot and seek out information outside of the virtual realm gleaned from varied social circles, it gains in density. Under those conditions, the virtual world is not substituted for the real world, cybermodernity becomes a possible gateway to a reflection on Otherness.

Richard Kern

Both Anthony Liddicoat and Geneviève Zarate clarify that it cannot be assumed that when people from different language/culture groups interact online that they will understand one another, much less engage in intercultural practices. Clearly, online interactions can reinforce stereotypes (Liddicoat) and can border on edutainment (Zarate), short-circuiting teachers' well-intentioned plans and hopes for real intercultural encounters. From my own experience with international exchanges, I would add that the goal of attaining pure, all-or-nothing states of intercultural practice is not very realistic in any kind of encounter, whether online or face-to-face. Like culture, intercultural practices are situated and emergent, not monolithic or absolute. It is therefore far more realistic, in my view, to look for elements of intercultural practice in what our students do and to use those elements to heighten our students' awareness. Liddicoat and Zarate are very helpful here, for they lay out some identifiers that allow us to recognise intercultural practices when we see them.

For Liddicoat, signs of intercultural practices would include engaging critically "with the place of language and culture in the interaction," creating "local practices of communication in interaction with each other," achieving "a shared perspective on the meaning and how it has been made," and looking for and accepting plurality in meanings, "taking positions between languages and cultures to facilitate communication and to develop knowledge of self and other and the meanings they create and understand in interaction." For Zarate, one mark of intercultural practice would be dialogic "progression" in students' interpretations, which would lead beyond the obvious and resist facile relativistic conclusions.

These are somewhat abstract characterisations. How, operationally, can teachers and researchers identify intercultural practices when they see them? Below I cite one example of dialogue that to me concretely illustrates some elements set forth by Liddicoat and Zarate (I have put in italics the excerpts that I believe reflect their criteria). It is a 2014 exchange between students of French at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and students at the Université de Lyon 2 as part of the Cultura project (Furstenberg & Levet, 2014). The exchange focuses on cultural connotations of the English word "individualism" compared to the French word individualisme.2

In a previous word-association activity, the American students had attributed a much more positive connotation to "Individualism" than the French students had to individualisme. An MIT student observes that the Lyon 2 students

> seem to have contrasted [individualisme] with collaboration and group efforts while American students view [individualism] as it relates to expression, personality, and feeling free. I suspect it's related to the history of counter-culture in the U.S. (That is, Americans contrast individualism with blind following as opposed to beneficial collaborative efforts.) Why do French students tend to think of egoism more than personality and expression?

One of the Lyon 2 students responds3:

> Personally, I associate it with a social attitude lacking in commitment, thinking of oneself (both truly individually and then locally, as well as nationally and globally) with only personal goals, without considering the community. And therefore all the consequences that carries with it: discrimination, segregation, closed-mindedness, etc. […] But yeah, if I take your perspective of self-development and being true to oneself, I can also see the positive side of it. I also noticed that some of you associated freedom with individualism, which, interestingly, none of us did. I'd like to know why you think that individualism is related to freedom?

An MIT student reflects:

> I think that Americans associate individualism with freedom because it denotes a sort of independence, expression of oneself, and the ability to do what you want/be yourself rather than conform to society's expectations. It is definitely associated with ideals such as free thought and free expression. It is very interesting that French students have a more negative association with this word. I can understand this perspective though, individualism may be a more selfish thought process – if people only consider themselves and their personal goals without thinking about the consequences for larger society it has the potential to cause problems for everyone.

Another Lyon 2 student chimes in to provide sociohistorical context4:

> I think that in France we more often have a negative view of individualism because its related to a loss of the sense of common good, a hedonistic focus on one's own individual interest to the detriment of the collective, a perversion of the consumerist society made possible by technological progress. French society has remained a rural society for a long time, and I would posit that a certain number of characteristics like solidarity and helping one another in a village, intergenerationally, in some workplaces early on during industrialisation like in mines and textile factories, in union struggles, are strongly fixed in our collective memory and in a feeling of belonging to French society. There is maybe some nostalgia too for this feeling that's summed up in Alexandre Dumas' motto for the Three Musketeers "All for one and one for all."
>
> It's true too that we have a very negative view of individual success: it's more often associated with amoral, greedy behaviour rather than with the results of hard work. Is it because American society, being so young, is still forward-looking, and that risk-taking is part of Americans' DNA, while the

> French have a hard time letting go of the need for the security and equality that has characterised their society for centuries?

The relative "jeunesse" (youth) of the United States is then taken up in a series of comments, along with the fact that the United States is a country of immigrants, where "Individualism is perceived as the freedom to be who you truly are, without the fear of being judged or sanctioned." Other MIT students pile on, and one asks, "Would French students have said different things if prompted with 'thinking for yourself' instead of 'individualism'?" In the end, a Lyon student concludes that clearly the two groups of students have distinct associations with individualism and that this is interesting because clearly "a different culture and history lead us to have different observations."

If culture has to do with "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings" (Kramsch, 1998, p. 10) then encounters that involve multiple cultures require working out what is and what is not "common" to the parties involved. Although it is debatable whether there is evidence of real change in either group's attitude (the conclusion is somewhat disappointing), what I think is clear in this MIT-Lyon 2 exchange is the presence of moments of intercultural practice in the form of questioning, hypothesising, perspective-shifting, and historicisation that build on one another, and that may contribute in the long run (over repeated encounters) to transformed thinking and intercultural insight.

Question 3. What values (for example, ethical, moral, social, aesthetic) are to be taken into account when engaging in virtual intercultural practices in education?

Geneviève Zarate

The question of what values are generated and shared by teaching first and foreign languages is a fundamental one. Yet, this debate is invisible. Who has seen it addressed in the presentation of a pedagogical tool in any way that is not limp-wristed, general, consensual, and evasive? Everyone acts as if this question should only be included implicitly in teaching, without requiring the designers and decision-makers to explicitly state what governs how these values are shaped.

What looks like mere avoidance of the question around the structure of a professional space can be explained in several ways. Firstly, because the separation within schools between first and foreign language learning tends to mask the need for and the bitterness of this debate, under cover of being "openminded towards others," Otherness is held up as a value that is automatically in place, easily accessible, systematically shared by the simple fact of learning a new language and necessarily included in the general framework of goals in a given educational system. Any difference that may exist between the values rooted in the language(s) learned at school and the family setting in which the students are socialised, a setting which is gendered, generational, and national, are completely left out. The divisions between academic disciplines create a silence that erases disruptions in meaning.

Additionally, the dissemination of national or regional languages is part of a broader context than simply the educational aspect and is tied to Politics in the widest sense. This dissemination is biased, a discreet part of soft power for the countries that are concerned with it, or part of a

cause, possibly a geopolitical one for languages linked to a nation or region: a struggle for autonomy or even independence from a sovereign state, maintaining linguistic and cultural ties to emigrants with their country of origin, affirmation and highlighting of a nation at the international level. The values that underlie the dissemination of languages must therefore be imagined as the product of a state discourse (Bourdieu, 2011) serving a more general project whose starting point is not the individual.

Three decades ago, I was able to demonstrate these procedures that format authoritative discourses (Zarate, 1993). For example, when the backdrop of a teaching tool is created in the country of the learner, comparison between the country and language(s) being taught and the pupil's country is avoided as it could reflect unfavourably either economically or politically on the latter. When the backdrop is made neutral because it is situated in a geographically or culturally undifferentiated space, questioning and comparison of values is erased. When the cultural differences between the languages present are minimised, no mention made of moral variances or taboos, the framework underpinning the teaching tool seeks consensus on values that are intimated to be universal.

In an extension of the reflection on both first and foreign languages, the argument that the learner will discover universal values is more like an intellectual trap in that it leaves no room for a contradictory opinion. School values built on what is permissible, the nation, beauty, sharing, loving one's neighbour, and freedom, are not up for discussion; they are affirmed with authority. What teaching tool would promote the opposite? This impasse in thinking leads to automatic, unconsidered acceptance creating a basis for a universalist approach to values that is contradicted by observable social practices. And it is precisely through interacting with native speakers of another culture that this enchanted worldview is the most likely to come unravelled. What is permissible, the nation, beauty, sharing, loving one's neighbour, and freedom are not conjugated the same way in every society, even those that hold themselves up as a model for others to follow. What is permissible stops at the border of a given religion even within one society; the nation is not constructed according to historic references equally shared by all its members; connection within a society can be defined solely by exclusion and xenophobia.

To summarise, when it comes to language learning, the values that are most often called upon in current teaching tools are only the surface of pedagogical discourse. This surface is moulded in no small way by state discourse, either of existing states or those that wish to affirm their existence by taking advantage of the dissemination of their language(s) to assert their international legitimacy. The dogma of universal values, conceived of as the pedagogical basis for teaching languages, breaks down when confronted with the lived social practices of the language being taught. The academic fabric of values is the product of a context determined first and foremost by countries' geopolitics. The dissemination of languages is a sounding board for them.

Do teaching practices based on virtual reality and communication change things? I will leave it to Richard Kern, with his work on digital exchanges and multi-modal, online communication, to answer that question.

Richard Kern

In her response to this question, Geneviève Zarate highlights a fundamental paradox: that values are ubiquitous yet all too often not recognised (and thereby invisible) in language teaching materials. The same might be said of the Internet. When language learners engage in

online intercultural practices (and this might be a pedagogically designed exchange with keypals but perhaps also direct participation in forums, special-interest groups, and online games) they are operating – perhaps knowingly, but more likely unwittingly – within multiple layers of culture and values that can affect the meanings and interpretations they make.

Every online space develops its own culture, influenced by both its technical design and its users' practices. Facebook, for example, embodies values like personal agency, openness, and connectedness, but it gives particular meanings to these broad values. Users create their own online profiles, but must use Facebook's valued categories of information. Openness can lead to invasion of privacy when a default setting spreads one's personal information more widely than one expects. And "friends" are not defined by any real familiarity with others, but merely by mutual willingness to be associated within Facebook. In chat rooms, language play is a strong value. Cleverness accrues prestige, and also reinforces the aesthetic dimension of online communication. The French chatteur who signs off with "baille baille" instead of the standard French "bye bye" is playing with a near homonym suggesting a "bored" or "tired" goodbye (using the verb bailler, to yawn). Being able to successfully participate in playful communication creates a sense of membership in an exclusive club, and thereby provides its own intrinsic motivation.

As Hanna and de Nooy (2009) point out, communicating online offers new opportunities for cultural differences to be expressed. Dooly (2011), for example, discusses a new pragmatics of politeness to deal with the distractions and interruptions that accompany interactions in online environments, new ways of introducing topics compatible with the interface, and new norms of sharing personal details (influenced by social media). She argues that educators need to interrogate what "intercultural" means when communication involves skills and competences that transcend the participants' national cultures (p. 334). That is, some of the skills and competences may be aligned with "computer culture," making "engagement with the other" in online interactions not only a matter of planning, managing, interpreting, and reflecting on communication with people from another culture, but also planning, managing, interpreting, and reflecting on the digital medium itself and how it affects those interactions.

Even when users are broadly socialised into computer culture, differences in individuals' "cultures-of-use" (Thorne, 2003) can lead to value mismatches. In a German-American online exchange, Ware (2005) found that students' different expectations for telecollaboration, their differences in motivation and use of time, and a variety of social and institutional factors all contributed to what she called "missed" communication. For some students, asynchronous messaging meant being brief and efficient, but this clashed with other students' understanding of what it meant to have a "discussion." The ability to engage in communication at a deep level of intercultural inquiry may be impeded by an online discourse norm that favours speed and brevity over sustained attention.

In response to Genevieve Zarate, I would add that not just culture and pedagogical materials, but also language itself risks being "neutralised" or "culturally undifferentiated." Language always presents a particular point of view (like a camera's framing, angle, and focus), and no two individuals will describe a shared experience in exactly the same way. In many online intercultural exchanges, one group is labelled "language learners" and another "native speakers" or "tutors." Such roles may have constraining effects and limit the learning potential of online exchanges. Lamy and Pegrum (2012) discuss an exchange in which students were not positioned as language learners but rather as representatives of their respective parts of the world. This positioning allowed them, as one of the students reported, "to know and understand

each other as 'human beings' and 'real people'" (p. 118). In the CULTURA project (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001), students always communicate in their respective mother tongues (i.e. all are positioned as "native speakers") to explore the concepts, values, beliefs, and attitudes that underlay their respective cultures and language use. Their goal is to problematise culture by juxtaposing languages, students' interpretations, and responses to those interpretations. If only one language were used for communication, this process would be short-circuited.

The values of silence and anonymity need to be re-evaluated in online activities. Silence equals invisibility, even non-existence, in text-based environments. And yet real learning may be occurring in that silence as participants observe and analyse others. There thus may be positive benefits of "lurking" as Ortega and Zyzik (2008) suggest; however, a more felicitous term might be "observing" or "noticing" or "monitoring" or "evaluating" due to the negative connotations of lurking. Ortega and Zyzik go on to point out that "from an ethical perspective… online interaction is never just about language, but about repositioning oneself and negotiating cultural, personal, and power differentials online" (p. 339). The relative anonymity and distance afforded by text-based electronic communication can be liberating, but it can also increase the risk of misunderstandings, interpersonal tensions, and even verbal attacks. At the very least, learners should be aware that anonymity can be a double-edged sword.

In sum, from an ethical standpoint, participants in online encounters need to be sensitive to how other people, living in different cultures, may perceive and value language, technologies and communication practices quite differently than they do. Most of all, they need to be responsible for their online actions, realising that what might seem "virtual" on their screen may have quite real and human consequences for those with whom they are communicating.
As Hanna and de Nooy (2009) point out, communicating online offers new opportunities for cultural differences to be expressed. Dooly (2011), for example, discusses a new pragmatics of politeness to deal with the distractions and interruptions that accompany interactions in online environments, new ways of introducing topics compatible with the interface, and new norms of sharing personal details (influenced by social media). She argues that educators need to interrogate what "intercultural" means when communication involves skills and competences that transcend the participants' national cultures (p. 334). That is, some of the skills and competences may be aligned with "computer culture," making "engagement with the other" in online interactions not only a matter of planning, managing, interpreting, and reflecting on communication with people from another culture, but also planning, managing, interpreting, and reflecting on the digital medium itself and how it affects those interactions.

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Anthony Liddicoat

Both Geneviève Zarate and Richard Kern have pointed to some of the complexities of values in language education and virtual intercultural interaction. They have also flagged the potential mismatch between teaching and learning approaches that downplay the impact of values in intercultural interactions and the potential for conflicts over values in such interactions. In doing so, their texts raise challenges for how we consider the values in and the values of education.

One criticism Geneviève Zarate makes of education is that engagement with others is often presented in such a way as to minimise conflict; students may not be exposed to contexts or practices that will be too challenging of their existing views and positions, they may be encouraged to view engagement with others as positive and unproblematic, or they may be encouraged to seek similarities and "universal" values. Language educators may protect learners for what appear to them to be good reasons; challenges may lead to rejection of the language and its speakers or otherwise demotivate learners. However, the realities of intercultural engagement are not always gentle, positive, and unchallenging, and actual contact with linguistically and culturally diverse others is not always experienced as positive and affirming. This is not to say that intercultural contacts are inherently fraught with conflicts and

difficulties but rather than learners need to be open to difficulties when they occur and have ways of working through them. It is in fact lacking such openness and ways of working that can lead to intercultural contact creating greater negativity towards others (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Morgan, 1993). In virtual intercultural interactions, language learners may encounter challenges and difficulties without the support of more experienced and knowledgeable others to help them navigate them. Classrooms can provide safe and supported environments for engaging with such difficulties and recasting them as opportunities for learning. It is thus important in language education, which by its nature prepares learners to engage with linguistically and culturally diverse others, to involve students in instances of the difficulties that they may experience.

Engagement with others' values should also be constructed as opportunities to learn about oneself, one's own values, and where those values come from (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Where students encounter differences, they need to reflect not only on these differences but also on their own reactions and responses to them. Reactions and responses involve spontaneous evaluations of others but often the grounds on which those evaluations are made are implicit and invisible. Such evaluations may be informed by a naive assumption that the values involved are in some way universal and are thus absolute criteria for evaluating others. Moreover, for those whose values are not challenged either in or out of school, they may appear to be self-evident and thus not needing critique. This means that language learners need to learn to decentre their own perspectives and learn to view them from the outside as well as from the inside. As Zarate (1986) argues, it is a lack of distance from one's own values that leads to a sense of conflict when things that are perceived as self-evident and universal are challenged in interaction with others. Language education thus needs to involve processes of reflecting on and decentring values and knowledge that have been held to be universal and undeniable ways of evaluating the social world.

In communicating with diverse others, it is also important to understand the values that construct the contexts of language use, both one's own and those of others. Language practices, social relationships, and evaluations of the instruments and practices through which communication is enacted are all constructs that have value-related dimensions, as Richard Kern notes. Understanding values would require successful communicators to be mindful of the ways their own values construct the circumstances of their interactions including values relating to the context, the participants, and the modes of participation. Similarly, they need to be aware that others' values also construct the interaction, and perhaps in different ways producing different understandings of what is going on.

The issues discussed in response to Question 3 show that using virtual intercultural communication in language learning presupposes a particular ethics of education (García Amilburu & García Gutiérrez, 2012; Moreau, 2007). It requires that certain ways of working to develop understanding of values be seen as worthwhile activities for teaching and learning, that is, as part of the responsibilities of teachers in educating learners and as part of what learners need to develop in order to be ethical participants in interactions with diverse others. The introduction of virtual intercultural practices into language education makes the other much more present in students' experiences of languages, cultures, and communication, and this requires a rethinking of the ethical dimension of teaching and learning to prepare learners to become participants in the new experiences they are offered.

Notes

1. Contributions by Geneviève Zarate translated from the French by Kate Davis.
2. I have excerpted it here, but it can be found in its entirety at http://cultura.mit.edu/cultura-exchanges/year/2014/semester/fall/host/mit/guest/universit-de-lyon-2/word-association/individualism-individualisme
3. Our translation.
4. Also, our translation.

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