Negotiating Differences: Instructors' Reflections on

Challenges in International Telecollaboration

Olga Basharina, University of New Mexico

Martin Guardado, University of British Columbia

Tannis Morgan, University of British Columbia

Abstract

This collaborative inquiry is based on university instructors' reflections on their experiences in negotiating and facilitating an international telecollaboration which connected their ESL/EFL (English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language) students in Canada, Mexico and Russia. The central themes found in the instructors' reflections were the tensions related to their different views of the project, research vs. pedagogical agenda, securing participation of have-nots, and instructor participation vs. non-participation in online interaction. The underlying reasons for tensions were found in the mismatch of instructors' educational philosophies and the affordances and constraints of their local contexts which informed their individual decisions. The study concludes with pedagogical implications for improvement of facilitation and teaching practice in online environments.

Keywords

Résumé

Cette recherche collaborative est basée sur les réflexions de quatre instructeurs universitaires qui s'engageaient dans la négociation et la direction d'une télécollaboration internationale qui a réuni des étudiants de ALS/ALE situés au Canada, au Mexique et en Russie. Les thèmes principaux qui en ressortent de ces réflexions reflètent comment les différentes perspectives du projet, l'agenda pédagogique vs l'agenda de recherche, le défi d'assurer la participation des étudiants ayant moins d'accès et la participation et non-participation des instructeurs, ont servis à créer des tensions pendant le déroulement du projet. On interprète l'existence de ces tensions comme étant

ancrées dans les différentes philosophies d'éducation de chacun des instructeurs ainsi que les affordances et contraintes de leur contextes locaux qui ont servi à informer leur décisions individuelles. Cette étude se conclut avec nos recommandations pédagogiques qui serviraient à améliorer la direction et l'instruction dans les environnements d'apprentissage à ligne.

Mots clés

télécollaboration internationale, liberté d'action, contextes socioculturels, recherche collaborative, tensions, WebCT, paradigmes pédagogiques.

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Introduction

The past decade in many educational contexts was marked by the shift from single

classrooms to international telecollaboration, defined as 'internationally-dispersed learners in

parallel language classes using Internet communication tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat,

threaded discussion and MOOs … in order to support social interaction, dialogue, debate and

intercultural exchange' (Belz, 2003; p.1). Telecollaborative projects expand the pedagogical

focus beyond language learning to learning culture; emphasize the notion of context beyond the

local settings to global social discourses; and problematize the notion of intercultural

communicative competence (Kern, Ware and Warschauer, 2004). International telecollaboration

is valued for its potential for promoting students' target language development, intercultural

awareness, and computer literacy, crucial goals in a time of increased interconnectedness and

emphasis on multiliteracies (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Carey, 1999; Chapelle, 2001; Cope &

Kalantzis, 2000; Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Cummins, 2000; Warschauer, 1999).

Despite the growing body of research on international telecollaboration, very few studies

focus on instructors' experiences and perspectives. This is especially surprising, given that

instructors play multiple key roles of organizers, negotiators, facilitators, experts, and learners in

telecollaborative projects. Therefore, the recognition of their crucial role in shaping students'

online experiences and learning and the importance of further investigation of instructors'

perspectives have been increasingly emphasized in recent studies (Belz, 2003, 2004; Kern, 2006;

Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003; O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004). More specifically, there

is a need for studies that analyze the complexities instructors encounter in their day-to-day lived

moments of organizing and implementing telecollaborative projects from different geographical, cultural and institutional contexts (Belz & Muller Hartmann, 2003). Given that instructors' perspectives are usually presented by outside researchers, there is a need for multi-voiced research that provides deeper insider perspectives on instructors' experiences in telecollaboration.

To address this gap, in this study we (the authors of the article) explore our own experiences of negotiating and facilitating a WebCT[1]-based international telecollaboration among our Japanese, Mexican and Russian ESL/EFL college students[2] located in Canada, Mexico, and Russia. We focus on the challenges we experienced throughout the implementation of the telecollaboration. In our exploration we go beyond merely listing the obstacles to be avoided in future projects and pursue the goal of demonstrating how our experiences are saturated with culture and ideology that can emerge as 'cultural fault lines' (Kramsch, 1993) in relationship with the other cultures and ideologies represented in the study. We hope that reflection on these fault lines may lead to intercultural understanding (Belz & Muller Hartmann, 2003) and improved practice.

In the next section, we revisit the existing body of research to lay the groundwork for our own study. The research methods section discusses the action research design of the study. The findings section presents our reflections, with each theme followed by a brief deliberation. The paper concludes with a general discussion and practical implications for future projects.

Complex instructor agency and roles in online projects

There is a significant body of research that has explored instructors' roles and styles of facilitating student online interactions (Annand & Haughey, 1997; Berge, 1995; Conrad, 2004; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Meskill & Anthony, 2005; Paulsen, 1995; Teles et.al., 2001).

Berge (1995), for example, identified four major roles--pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical--assumed by instructors when facilitating computer conferencing. It was found that instructors tended to implement not all four roles simultaneously, but one or two, often giving preference to the pedagogical role associated with conveying sufficient content to students (Conrad, 2004). It was suggested that instructors' concern for content delivery should be balanced with learners' needs for a sense of a socially-constructed community in which the latter can make sense of their learning.

Related to this body of research is the inquiry that focuses on instructor authority and its challenge in online environments. Research along these lines suggests that those instructors who have difficulty abandoning traditional curriculum- or teacher-centered methods encounter resistance from their students; whereas those who are able to adjust by devolving more power and control to students achieve better results (Annand & Haughey, 1997; Sandholtz, et.al., 1997; Tella, 1996; Warschauer, 1999). These studies suggest that instructors must yield power as 'the reduction of authority translates into increased empowerment for students' (Spitzer, 1990; p. 62). They should also assume the role of a facilitator: 'someone who makes suggestions, asks for clarification, and gives encouragement' (ibid). The role of an instructor as a 'guide on the side' (Fitch cited in Tella, 1996, p. 6) in telecollaboration is considered to be beneficial in at least three ways: by helping develop learner autonomy, fostering a perception of the online environment as a safe-house (Canagarajah, 1997; Pratt, 1991) and easing teacher workload.

In order to fully implement the model of reduced authority which translates into increased empowerment for students (Spitzer, 1990), they should have unlimited access to computers. In addition, students and instructors should have sufficient experience with highly interactive bulletin boards (BB) in order to engage in 'the re-structured author-

text-reader relationship' which allows 'a higher degree of textual malleability in terms of both production and interpretation compared to engagement with other print texts' (Rassool, 2002, p. 203). Otherwise, the students' participation and expectations of the instructor-student relationship on the bulletin board will not differ much from their beliefs and participation in traditional classrooms (Basharina, 2007). Given that classroom interactional styles and learning schemas can be easily transferred to on-line spaces (Angeli, Bonk & Hara, 1998; Bonk & King, 1998; Zack & McKenny, 1995), participants from countries favoring a curriculum- and teacher-centered paradigm, for example, might expect to function within a similar paradigm in online environments. Such transfer might be due to participants' limited experience with highly interactive bulletin boards, since these online forums are often characterized by a departure from the traditional three-part sequence of teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation (IRE) (Mehan, 1979). In some instances, participants would not even be given an opportunity to interact in routines other than IRE patterns, simply because of the expensive, and thus limited, Internet access which would restrict their online time, preventing them from questioning teacher authority (Basharina, 2005). Basharina, for example, found that access to technology, prior experience of working on a highly interactive BB, and encountering otherness helped students to critically approach the rules set by their instructor and to shape interaction according to their personal styles. Thus, the question of teacher authority might also depend on resources available to learners in different socio-cultural contexts (Thorne, 2003).

Several studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) have explored the quantitative and qualitative aspects of teacher participation (Annand & Haughey, 1997; Berge, 1995; Conrad, 2004; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Meskill & Anthony, 2005; Paulsen, 1995; Teles et.al., 2001). One of the new issues raised in the research literature is the necessity of instructor presence in online communities. In online informal interest groups, for example, there are no facilitators – each individual participant may perform multiple roles such as facilitator, novice, or expert – depending on her/his expertise in various topics. Recent studies in the area of international telecollaboration (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Kern, 1996, p. 108; O'Dowd and Eberbach, 2004; Ware & Kramsch, 2005), however, emphasize that the role of the instructor in international telcollaboration should be intensified rather than diminished. In particular, instructors should be involved in 'discerning, identifying, explaining, and modeling culturally-contingent patterns of interaction in the absence of paralinguistic meaning signals' (Belz, 2003, p. 92).

Previous studies have focused on the actions of instructors in the process of fulfilling their functions. Meanwhile, the underlying reasons for those actions and the whole complexity of the relationship between instructor agency and contexts has tended to be overlooked (Belz & Muller-Hartmann, 2003). The next body of research we review, addresses this problem by making explicit the ways in which the use of computers is mediated by the beliefs of individual instructors and teachers and their institutional contexts (O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004; Parks, et.al., 2003; Sandholtz, et.al., 1997; Warschauer, 1999). Warschauer (1999), for example, found that instructors made choices within the constraints of their situations and based on their own teaching beliefs. Nunan (1999) also found that CMC depended on instructors' personal styles

and beliefs about teaching and learning, which can either enhance or limit the Initiation - Response - Evaluation (IRE) pattern.

Duff and Uchida (1997) introduce a micro-dimension of interaction between a context and instructor agency. Even though their research was conducted in a face-to-face context, it is highly relevant to online contexts as these also represent highly social and interactive communities of practice (Burbules, 2000; De Pourbaix, 1992). Duff and Uchida place emphasis on the importance of instructors' everyday lived experiences that transform their views. In their study of two U.S. and two Japanese instructors teaching English language and culture in Japan, they found that instructors' perceptions of their sociocultural identities were deeply rooted in their personal histories based on past educational, professional, and cross-cultural experiences. These perceptions were not fixed, but constantly evolving within moment-to-moment changing contexts such as the classroom/institutional culture, instructional materials, and reactions from students and colleagues. All four instructors became conscious of the complexities and paradoxes of their professional, social, political and cultural identities as they felt differences between their implicit and explicit cultural messages.

In this research we pursue the goal of revealing the complexities of instructors' pedagogical choices when shaping a telecollaborative activity, particularly drawing on the study by Belz and Muller-Hartmann (2003). Belz and Muller-Hartmann, who applied this 'zoomed in' vision of instructors to telecollaboration, argue that teachers' agency in telecollaboration is shaped by a myriad of socio-institutional affordances and constraints, which may not be necessarily similar to those experienced by their students. These socio-institutional affordances and constraints 'are rooted solidly in the teachers' individual experiences of, and situatedness in,

9

schools and schooling' (p. 72). In turn, teachers' responses to socio-institutional conditions shape the telecollaborative environment and the learning experiences of their students.

Research methods

The purpose of this research was to examine the challenges the authors of this article encountered in different institutional and cultural contexts during the implementation of a long-distance international collaborative project. Through this research, we intended to demonstrate the complexity of implementing intercultural online projects, given that each party operates from unique educational, cultural and material contexts and perspectives. In order to achieve our aim, we outlined our personal reflections, guided by the following question: What were the challenges in implementing and participating in the project?

The study represents deliberative-practical action research (McKernan, 1988). Action research is defined as a 'systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry' (McCutcheon & Jung 1990; p. 148). In practical action research, researchers and practitioners come together to identify potential problems, their underlying causes and possible interventions through constructive dialogue in order to improve practice 'through the application of the personal wisdom of the participants' (Grundy, 1982).

The study employs self-reflecting narratives as one of the core interactive methods for conducting this collaborative inquiry. The documented narrative accounts aim to help instructors and researchers understand their own values and priorities and to provide them with insights into their decision-making processes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

In this study, the process of constructing the narratives was both individual and collaborative. The instructors' reflections were documented immediately after the project completion based on interviews conducted by one of the authors (Olga) for her own dissertation

research. Interviews with instructors were not the focus of her research per se, but an important part of gaining a more complete picture of the project as well as for triangulation of students' reflections. The interviews with instructors, which lasted for about an hour in each case, were tape-recorded, transcribed, translated (in the case of the Russian instructor), partially used in Olga's research, and archived. During the interviews we (the instructors and a researcher) informally agreed on the collaborative article. Once we felt ready to commit to writing, we decided to reflect upon the challenges of implementing the project with an eye to developing pedagogical implications. Each of us wrote our own narrative using the transcribed interviews as a springboard in reconstructing our reflections in an informal style.

Whereas we -- the instructors of the Japanese (Martin) and the Mexican (Tannis) -- students wrote our own reflections, the Russian instructor's (Natalya's) responses to the interview questions were reconstructed by Olga. (who was also a teaching assistant in the Canadian context).

The instructors

The implementation of the international project required the collaboration of the three instructors, a teaching assistant, a university professor, and a technical assistant. Their role was to facilitate critically-framed discussions that were conducive to students' L2 writing development and intercultural awareness. The authors of this article had different cultural and educational backgrounds. Martin immigrated to Canada from El Salvador in the early 1980s. At the time the project was conducted, he had recently completed his Master's degree and was a part-time instructor in a Japanese-Canadian exchange programme at a major South-Western Canadian university. Olga was an international Ph.D. student from Russia who was conducting her dissertation research based on the same project, and was a teaching assistant in the same

Japanese-Canadian exchange programme and university. Natalya, the instructor of the Russian students, had been a professor for more than 20 years and occupied a high level administrative position at her university in Russia. Tannis was a Canadian who had just completed her Master's degree. At the time the project was conducted, she had relocated to Mexico to teach English for one year.

Martin, Olga, and Tannis had met as colleagues at the same university. Natalya never met face-to-face with them, except for Olga, who had worked with her at a university in Russia before coming to Canada. While Martin, Olga and Tannis had an advanced level of computer literacy and had been using WebCT courseware extensively prior to this project, Natalya had never used WebCT before. She stated in our interview that her students had 'much more advanced' computer literacy than she did.

Natalya was older than the three other instructors and was the head of the Department of English for Specific Purposes at her university. These status differences did not have any bearing on her attitudes toward her younger colleagues on the other side of the globe. However, her status constantly played a role in her relations with her own students. She positioned herself as an authority figure in relation to her students and she did not post any messages on the project bulletin board in order to not intimidate her students. Natalya controlled them from 'the outside,' by checking their messages from the floppy-disks that students handed in to her every week. On the other hand, the fact that she was from the 'periphery,' an invited party, whereas the rest of the instructors were situated in the 'center' and were the 'hosts' of the project, made Natalya feel grateful that her students were chosen for this project and she appreciated the opportunity to participate.

Natalya was working with the Russian students in an EFL context, Tannis was working in a bilingual institute in Mexico, whereas Martin and Olga worked with the Japanese students in a Canadian ESL context. In the Russian and Mexican contexts the value of the project increased because of the students' lack of opportunities to use the target language authentically outside of the universities. In the Canadian ESL context, the programme involved 100 Japanese students who took credit courses and participated in various activities together, so they had to make a considerable effort to avoid speaking Japanese outside of class and to seek interactions with non-Japanese language speakers. Therefore, for the Japanese students, especially for those who were always around their counterparts, the project was also a great opportunity to be put in a position where they would have to use the target language.

The students

The project involved 52 Japanese, 37 Mexican, and 46 Russian English learners. There were several commonalities—as well as differences—among the students: they were 18-22 years old, in their second or third year of university, majoring in various fields, studying English as a foreign or second language, or taking credit courses in an exchange programme. The overall level of written English proficiency among all three cultural groups was approximately similar and mostly intermediate, which was evident in the students' writing on the bulletin board. They were selected as partner-classrooms because of these commonalities.

On the other hand, there were differences in students' access to computer technology. Whereas all Japanese and Mexican students had free access at their universities and all of them, except for four Mexican students, had Internet in their dormitories or at home, most of the Russian students only had limited access on campus and half of them did not have

computers/Internet at home. They only had free dial-up Internet access during their lab time and at an additional charge outside of class. The Internet speed was also slower in the Russian context.

The project

The project discussed in this article was launched after two smaller-scale pilots conducted in the Spring and Summer semesters of 2001 with the Canadian, Japanese, and Russian students.

When Tannis moved to Mexico in the Fall of 2001 to teach English for a year, we decided to connect her Mexican students with the new cohorts of Japanese and Russian students. The goal of the project was to provide students with authentic intercultural, linguistic and technological experiences, and by doing so, enrich their learning opportunities.

The major differences between the pilot projects and the one examined in this article were in the larger number of students involved in the main project and in the greater degree of integration of the project into the curricula. In the pilot projects, for example, the students interacted out of class time, whereas in this project the Japanese and the Russian students had a specific lab time as part of their course timetable. The Mexican students were the only ones who did not have a lab session attached to their course. In addition, the project was given a certain percentage of the total mark in the three contexts. The details of the project participation evaluation in the three contexts are discussed elsewhere in the article.

The preparation for this project involved a great deal of face-to-face and e-mail negotiation among the instructors in the three contexts, setting up the WebCT IDs and passwords for students, explaining to them how to use the bulletin board, and creating the WebCT site for introducing students to the upcoming project.

Project integration in three contexts

The project was integrated into the face-to-face courses students took in their universities.[3] It incorporated the following WebCT materials: 1) project plan, 2) instructions on how to use discussion bulletin boards, 3) bulletin boards, 4) chat rooms, 5) pictures, and 6) useful links. Students were advised to explore the website at the beginning of the project. Students were divided into four forums with an approximately equal number of participants from the three countries and gender balance, with one instructor in each. The following were some of the features of the bulletin boards that encouraged student written interaction:

- Students' entries could be organized chronologically or in threads that followed a particular theme or topic.

- Students could view all postings or only the ones that they had not yet read.

- Students could initiate a new topic for discussion by using the 'compose' button, or they could respond to another student's question or entry by pressing the 'reply' button.

- The instructor and students could use the quote function to incorporate text from a previous posting in order to comment on it in a new posting.

- Students could post their academic essays and pictures onto the electronic bulletin board by using an attachment, or by copying and pasting their document onto a message.

The instructors mediated the project differently in the three instructional contexts. The Japanese students were not required to post a minimum number of messages.[4] They engaged in

the telecollaboration and in two other online activities–WebQuests and journal writing–during their lab time. In addition, they were encouraged to interact on the BB out of class time. Martin allocated 20% of the total course mark for student participation in the project.

For the Mexican students the online interaction was an entirely out-of-class activity serving as a replacement for essay writing, and formed a significant part of their graded course activities (25%). They were required to post five messages and read ten messages each week, and were aware that the instructor was tracking their participation using WebCT's detailed student tracking system.

The Russian students engaged with the project during their lab time and did not do any other additional activities besides the project.[5] Their instructor (Natalya) required them to post five half-page long messages every week. She gave them five broad themes to write on before the project plan was posted online. Unlike Martin and Tannis, Natalya instructed her students to conduct library research, and to use dictionaries. In addition, the Russian students were required to catch up with their minimum of five messages in case they did not post all of them during the current week. Since the Russian university followed an institutional script (Belz, 2002) with no percent-based breakdown of the total grade, Natalya did not allocate any percentage for student participation, but made the project the only task for which students received a course grade.

The number of messages posted by each individual instructor ranged from 50 to 150 (see Table 1). INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

By the end of the project the students posted 3,022 messages with 854 messages in forum A, 746 in forum B, 769 in forum C, and 653in forum D. Table 2 illustrates that on average, the Japanese students posted half as many messages as the Mexican and Russian students. On average, the largest number of messages was posted by the Mexican

female students. The high standard deviation indicates that there was a big difference in student participation within contexts – ranging from those who posted only 5 messages to 60 messages and higher. INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The reading activity (Table 3) revealed surprising findings; despite the fact that Russian students posted the largest number of messages, they read the least. At the same time, the Japanese students, who posted the least, on average, engaged in a balanced reading activity. These differences were mainly due to the differences in the cultures-of-use of computer technologies (Thorne, 2003) in the three instructional contexts, which will be reflected upon by the instructors in the findings section. INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Findings

In this section we outline the five challenges we encountered in the project implementation process, which emerged from our reflections. Each challenge is accompanied by a brief deliberation.

Challenge 1: Assessment and integration of the project

Martin: I don't think that the beginning of the project went as smoothly as I had expected. For instance, the planning phase was a somewhat frustrating stage trying to find the right balance regarding several issues. One of these issues was evaluation. The project administrators, and possibly other instructors, wanted to assign a high percentage of marks to the WebCT project (25-30%), whereas I wanted to keep it moderate at around 15%. Their motive was to use marks as an incentive to promote student participation, making online participation a high-stakes activity in the course. My perspective was that I could not make the WebCT project the center of

the whole course. I was committed to a course syllabus that had been approved by the programme administration and felt that it was my responsibility to honor that commitment. In addition, I did not want to overwhelm my students with one assignment for the entire hour-long lab session every week. If students engaged only in the WebCT activity during their lab time, it might have been too much for them. Additionally, this was a credit course that included other content-based assignments and activities. Therefore, I made a decision to give my students additional tasks, besides the WebCT activity, during their lab time.

Second, my course consisted of a range of activities including essays, reflection journals, oral presentations, and other web tasks which called for a balance of marks. Additionally, I felt that since most of the WebCT work would be done during class time in my course, there was no justification for assigning high marks for it. This was an issue that we debated often and which I also debated in my head. I did not want to be the 'odd man out' in the project and be seen as a 'sabotager' of the ideal project, but also wanted to be fair to students and be true to my philosophy as a teacher and to what I thought was a more balanced approach. In trying to dictate how the course should be conducted, Olga was perhaps overlooking the fact that many hours had gone into designing the course with different objectives in mind. For instance, she asked me to increase the percentage for student participation in the project, and reduce the number of other assignments given to students.

It was during a meeting with the project director and the academic exchange programme executive director that the final agreement was reached, and after that, only the details had to be ironed out, during which process, other disagreements and frustrations emerged. After some discussion over the phone, by email as well as in 'formal' and chance meetings where all other details were discussed, we all had to compromise and I finally agreed that my course would

assign 20 % for participation in the project. I suppose that getting all the instructors involved in the project with their various courses to agree on evaluation, content for the discussions, etc., was a success in itself.

Natalya: Distance education initiatives are very much supported by our university. We were happy to participate in this project. I told students that they had this great opportunity to become a part of this innovative and important project, initiated by the Canadian side.

The students' English course consisted of 3 parts – English grammar, reading and business English, taught by three different instructors and resulting in three grades. I taught the business English section and agreed to allocate 12 weeks of my course for this project only. Instead of coming to my classroom, students met in the computer lab twice a week, where they engaged in the project. Since we had a limited number of computers, there was a big demand for them among all university students. I had to come to the computer lab in order to make other students free up computers and give spaces to my students. Students' grades for participation in the project became their grades for the Business English section of the course.

Olga: I asked Martin if he could assign a higher percentage to his students for participation in the project rather than for two other activities (web-quests and journal writing). My underlying agenda was to make the project the central activity during the Japanese students' lab time, as I doubted that the assigned 15% would motivate them enough. I also knew that Tannis was going to assign 25% for student participation of her students. I assumed that it should not be a problem for Martin to increase the percentage for participation in the project. As for the participation of the Russian students, I was quite sure that once they got Internet access they would demonstrate active participation because of their high motivation and also because of the pressures put on them by their instructor.

Tannis: I felt fortunate that I was teaching in a context where extensive use of educational technology was encouraged and even mandated for teaching and learning, and excellent support structures were in place for both students and teachers. Therefore access to technology and high speed Internet was not a concern. Additionally, I had total control over the evaluation structure of my course, and had total freedom in the design and content that went into it. However, there were certain institutional pressures that guided my actions. First, upon completion of the course I was teaching, students were required to take a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), and needed a score of 550 to be able to graduate from any of their programmes. However, teaching to the TOEFL was discouraged. Second, student evaluations of teachers at my institution (a private university) carried a lot of weight, and students were known to be very critical if a course was found to be boring, irrelevant, or if the teacher was not well suited to their learning style. I felt considerable pressure to provide a course that they would find interesting and relevant, which often meant abandoning the textbook in favor of other activities.

I fully supported giving 25% for the activity because I knew from other activities that my time-conscious students would put their efforts where the marks were, and I genuinely felt that this activity would not only require this effort, but would also give them real benefits in their language learning. I didn't see this activity as being an add-on or as being less worthy than the exams or essays that they were being asked to do in my course—if anything I felt it was the most important activity of the course.

Deliberation: All instructors emphasized the role of the broader institutional contexts in their decision making regarding the execution of the project and student assessment. The fact that the project was supported by the administration of all three universities validated its implementation. Whereas Natalya, Olga and Tannis perceived the project as the central and most

important activity, for Martin it was an important activity, but equal in value to other assignments incorporated in his course. Such differences in views influenced instructors' assessment decisions. In addition, to change the percentage from 15% to 25% for Martin meant reconsidering the whole course structure which had been approved in the preceding term by the programme administration. Olga was informed by her concern that Japanese students would not demonstrate active participation because of the low weighting of the activity. Natalya also emphasized the importance of the broader context in motivating her to involve her students in the project.

Another issue that arose out of the discussion about grading was how to negotiate differences among universities with different institutional scripts, as in the case of this study. For example, in the Russian university system there was no percent-based break-down of the total mark, as it was calculated based on students' participation throughout the course in general and based on marks from high-stakes mid-term and final exams. For this reason, Natalya did not take part in the negotiation over the grading structure, and her students were evaluated differently. Given that the project was the only activity Russian students engaged in during Natalya's portion of class, they perceived it as a high-stakes activity worth 100%.

Challenge 2: Open interaction or structured activity?

Martin: The underlying philosophy in my teaching includes principles such as student-centeredness, democracy, negotiation, equal relationships, independence and respect. Thus, in the implementation of the tellecollaboration I believed that it was important to have some structure in order to know where we wanted to go and what we wanted students to achieve, but at the same time, I wanted to motivate, not force, the students to participate. I believed that participation in the project was a unique opportunity for my students and expected them to

recognize this and take advantage of it. There were times when some students chose not to work on the WebCT forum during our allotted lab time and I chose not to force them. I felt that once they were given the instructions, the guidance, and the tools for an activity, it became their own responsibility to advance their learning.

In addition, I did not think it was constructive to restrict the topics discussed on the forum. I felt it was important to provide some guidelines, modeling and topic suggestions, but students should have the freedom to initiate their own topics. Very often I noticed that the issues that generated the most discussion were the ones posed by students.

Olga: I believed that the project should be structured. The underlying reason for making the project a 'structured package' was informed by my belief that this format would be more suitable in the Russian context with their limited Internet access, slow Internet connection, preference for curriculum-centered instruction, and Natalya's lack of experience with WebCT. I also had a concern that unstructured interaction may easily fall to the level of phatic interaction, which can be considerably below students' zone of proximal development and which might not lead to the development of their academic writing. A structured activity, in comparison, could be designed to attain more academic outcomes.

I came up with a weekly plan, suggested topics for interaction, netiquette rules, instructions on how to write introductions and on how to write in various genres, and a number of requirements for participation. When I talked to Tannis on the phone (she was already in Mexico at that time), she disagreed with me with regards to making the project highly structured and task-based; therefore, I lightened it up by excluding some of the requirements. We were able to upload the materials on the website by the end of January.

Interestingly, after the plan was uploaded, Japanese and Mexican students avoided it, whereas Russian students were the only ones who followed it. In fact, as it turned out, the project became an open interaction for Japanese and Mexican students, and a structured activity for Russian students.

Natalya: I was entirely dependent on the information that I would receive from Canada. In my course students always get assignments a month ahead, however, by the time of meeting with my students before they went on their Christmas break, I did not have it. Therefore, I came up with five different themes on my own, so the students could prepare for the project beforehand, while they were on their break. It was important for me to show my students that I was in charge even though I did not have a clear vision of the project by that time. Pretending to be knowledgeable about the project was quite uncomfortable for me.

The students usually came into the lab, sent their messages and handed in their floppy-discs to me for corrections. At the beginning I underlined their errors, but after a while it became hard to go over every message. I had 50 students who wrote 5 messages a week. There should have been a team correcting all the errors in every single message. Sometimes I asked other instructors to help me, but they had their own work. So, I just compiled lists with common errors and discussed them with students in class.

The messages of my students were quite long and the messages of Japanese and Mexican students were shorter. I explained to my students that for us, the activity was the whole course work, whereas for the Mexican and Japanese students, it was an informal, mostly out of class activity. In addition, since our students wrote using the same five themes I had given them, their writing tended to be very repetitious. I should have come up with more topics so there would not have been any repetitions.

Tannis: In the course I was teaching, I was looking for authentic opportunities for English language use and saw the international forum as a way to encourage student writing skills, while being engaged in a communicative activity. I was influenced by a constructivist view that suggested that a learner-centered approach to the discussion forum would give students more ownership and provide them with a certain motivation to write that they otherwise wouldn't have if they were being asked to write essays directed at a teacher audience. Therefore, I told them there would be certain topics, but that they could start any topic of their own, and didn't have to post in the required topics if they did not want to.

Deliberation: These reflections demonstrate the remarkable differences in Natalya's and Olga's on one side and Martin's and Tannis's visions of the project on the other side. Whereas Natalya and Olga envisioned it as a structured and task-based activity, Martin and Tannis viewed it as a space for student-centered interaction. Natalya and Olga were informed by the broader curriculum-centered educational tradition at the university level in Russia, lack of computer and Internet access in that context, and Natalya's lack of experience working with highly interactive discussion forums. Martin and Tannis, on the other hand, were following their frame of reference using the WebCT environment as a highly interactive, student-owned and student-shaped adjunct to the course.

In addition, Natalya felt dependent on instructors in Canada since she was on the periphery. Her identity as a 'knowledgeable instructor' had been jeopardized when she found herself dealing with the project without having a clear vision and sufficient technological experience.

Challenge 3: Research vs. pedagogical agenda

Martin: Another challenge was the amount of work that our course would require students to do in the non-WebCT related activities. There was a fair amount of pressure on Olga's part to cut down on the other assignments, arguing that they would overload students. I had trouble with the motives since at the same time, Olga was suggesting a highly structured and heavily loaded WebCT set of assignments (autobiographies, essays in different genres, formal replies, etc.). My course assignments were already lighter than in the previous term, so I felt that further lightening was unwarranted. At that point I felt that the research agenda was overriding the pedagogical objectives of the course. That made me uneasy at the time and also made me rethink my participation in the project—I think I even considered calling it off. The only reason I did not call it off was because Olga had requested to be a teaching assistant in my course so that she could be involved in this project from inside.

Natalya: The questionnaires and the five interview questions Olga had sent to us were a great addition to the project. They helped students reflect on their experiences and served as an excellent motivating tool. In addition, they were learning about conducting research.

Tannis: I was determined that my students would get something out of this project and that they would love doing it. However, I felt conflicted at times when I was using up my time for copying and conducting questionnaires Olga sent me and having students fill them out during class time to ensure that Olga got the data she needed, and then arranging and conducting interviews at the end when I was busy with so many other things. Sometimes small requests actually became large stresses--for example, I was very sensitive to the fact that paper and photocopying were luxuries at my institution, so when I was asked to make a small change to a multiple page questionnaire after it had been copied and collated I had to decline. My students

were aware that they were participating in a research project, but I felt that my primary responsibility was to them, which is why I sometimes directed their participation in a way that didn't always coincide with that of the researcher.

Olga: Since this project was designed as the research base for my dissertation, I always kept in mind that my roles in this project differed from Martin's and Tannis's whose main interest in this project was pedagogical, and myself trying to balance pedagogical *and* research goals. My ultimate aim was to achieve a win-win situation--so students and instructors would be happy and my research would be well-implemented. As a researcher I felt a huge responsibility for putting the project together and offering it to the instructors. I was constantly concerned about not losing momentum and collecting my data in a timely manner. Dictating my agenda felt important at that time, when I was determined to accomplish my research goals.

I felt very comfortable approaching all three instructors with a request to conduct questionnaires and interviews with their students. With the Japanese students this was not even the case, as I was teaching them together with Martin and they knew me very well. Tannis was supervised by the same professor as I was when she was pursuing her master's degree, and we worked as a team presenting at various conferences together. She was very much willing to engage her students in this project and to support my dissertation research. I did not know Martin as well as I knew Tannis, but he appeared to be enthusiastic about the project and agreed to be part of it. I was absolutely sure that Natalya would support my requests, because as the Head of her department at the Russian university she was very supportive of any research and innovative initiatives.

In addition, the high level of comfort I experienced with all three instructors and students in conducting my research was due to their open-minded and understanding personalities. In

addition, I relied on my belief that Martin and Tannis had recently been graduate students themselves and this would make them particularly supportive. Interestingly, I did not feel that Martin was seriously challenged by my request to give the project the central role, as he never openly showed his frustration. Tannis, on the other hand, let me know of the difficulties with copying the questionnaires and administering them among her students in a personal e-mail.

Deliberation: The relationship between a researcher and an educational research site is quite complex, given that multiple interests and pedagogical circumstances are involved. In this project the instructors had differing perceptions about what collaborating with the researcher entailed. While the interests of Martin and Olga diverged on the issue of the percentage of the total mark assigned to the project, Tannis had problems with taking the time from the course to make her students fill out the lengthy questionnaires and conduct interviews with those students who chose to be interviewed face-to-face (Olga interviewed the rest in an online chat-room). Natalya, on the other hand, was happy to involve her students in Olga's research procedures during class time.

Olga was in a position of researcher, project leader, and teaching assistant and she constantly struggled with how to balance her pedagogical and research agendas. Her experience serves as a reminder that researchers should move with caution in order to avoid conflicts of interest. In addition, this experience made everyone realize that only if there is a fair amount of support and good relationships among collaborators as well as with students, can this type of work succeed.

Challenge 4: Securing participation of have-nots

Martin: Another challenge was trying to coordinate and secure the participation of Russian students. Although the Mexican students had been very active during the pilot run (conducted in

the previous term), the Russian students were not able to join the discussion. This time around, I kept checking and double-checking with Olga regarding whether the Russian group would actually participate. This was crucial because I thought that their participation was key to the success of the project. I was a bit nervous about this for a while and kept assuring the Japanese students that the Russian students would come on board; that they were getting ready for it. It was a great relief when the first ones started posting their introductions. Luckily, things slowly improved and the project got to a somewhat sketchy start, first with Japanese students online, then Mexicans and eventually Russians.

Olga: In the pilot project with Mexican and Russian students, the Russians were not able to join the project, as it was designed as a lab activity for them and at that time, the Internet was down for most of the semester. That is why when the first Mexican and Russian students posted their messages with a little delay in this project, I felt a huge sense of relief and joy.

Tannis: I felt that same sense of relief when other groups started posting, because I had really amplified the international aspect of this project in an effort to gain full buy-in and motivation from the students. However, I knew that the requirements I had put into place for my students (post 5 messages per week, and read 10, with no carry over) would ensure that there would be full participation, at least from the Mexican students. I felt that the challenge of this project was that I had no control over whether the Japanese and the Russian students would participate and, therefore, I had to ensure that I was somehow able to fulfill the goal of creating more authentic writing opportunities for the students.

Natalya: We are not quite technologically-ready to participate in interactive Internet projects but we feel it is important to do what we can. We cannot wait until we are ready; we need to use what is available to us right now. Most of the students and I did not have Internet

access at home. I could work only from my office. The labs operated on a user-fee basis and there was always a waiting line in the free labs. Without me, the students would have waited for at least two hours to get a computer. My presence made it possible to give them access to the lab at certain hours and work in the forums.

Deliberation: From Martin's, Olga's and Tannis' reflections, it can be inferred that the beginning of the project was associated with concerns about whether the Russian students would join the project at all, based on our previous experience when they could not join the pilot project. In international telecollaboration, when some participants come from countries with challenging socio-economic situations or from institutions with limited Internet access, there is always a chance that collaboration will fail to take place or will be hindered in the course of the project. Another issue is that the students in the technologically-challenged country may give up participating in the online project altogether because of the difficulties with Internet access, including slow speed. The fact that the Russian students did not give up their involvement was made possible by Natalya's effort in trying things out despite the restricted conditions; by her proactive approach to securing her students' access to the lab; and through her authoritativeness, which allowed her to strictly control the students' participation. This leads us to consider issues such as instructors' personal charisma and other characteristics, which can facilitate students' participation.

Challenge 5: Ambiguity around instructors' participation

Martin: Communication among the project organizers was generally very efficient, but email messages should be cc'd (carbon-copied) to everyone, and all instructors should also participate on the BB discussions. To me, the Russian instructor was a complete stranger, since she never posted in the forums and I never received emails from her.

Tannis: While I was aware that Natalya wasn't answering our emails or participating, it wasn't really a concern to me because I didn't really see the instructor participation as being that important in this project. I actually felt like I myself participated very little in the forums. In a previous project, I read every message everyday and posted regularly. However, the size of this group was much larger and I found it difficult to keep up. Additionally, I was carrying more than a full teaching load that semester, and was working evenings and weekends just to keep up. I tried to pull threads from the online discussions into my face-to-face class sessions to show to students that I was monitoring their participation, and also to take advantage of some 'teachable moments,' but actually posting in the discussion forum was the last thing on my mind. My personal belief is that if students overlook the messages of the instructors, we have effectively reduced the teacher-student hierarchy and have potentially achieved a more egalitarian community. There is evidence that my students did not know, apart from myself, who the other instructors were. They thought Martin and Olga were fellow students. In my mind, this is a great thing, since it is potentially one less power structure that they are dealing with.

Natalya: We have a different approach in our system of education – the instructor is an authority figure and there are hardly any democratic relations between the latter and his/her students. My students have a different mentality. Many of them do not study for themselves, they study for me. They tend to understand that they should study for themselves only when they are more mature, generally at the time when they are in their third year of university. Had I expressed my opinions on the bulletin board, they would have, probably, conformed to me. So I decided that it was better for me to not appear online, otherwise, students would have felt constrained; they would have written in the way I wrote, in the directions determined by me.

Olga: Each of us was assigned an individual forum, but as a researcher I tried to participate in all of them. I logged on the bulletin board every day and spent at least two hours there, so it was like a second part-time job for me. I was a true believer that instructors were crucial in facilitating online discussions, promoting students' higher order thinking. In my messages I did my best to post questions that, in my view, could have stretched students' thinking and language. My only concern was that because of the large number of participants our messages could have been easily overlooked.

It was interesting to hear Martin's opinion that in one situation I shut down students' interaction when they were discussing the topic on their attitudes toward alcohol. This was a student-initiated, very lively discussion, which was a brave gender and academic identity-crossing experience. This discussion attracted many passive participants who suddenly opened up. After I posted my own opinion on how negative I was toward drinking, the discussion was silenced.

As for Natalya's participation, I suspected that the reasons for her non-participation were not that simple. As a charismatic person and an excellent instructor, she would have enriched our project tremendously. I had known Natalya for several years while I was a student-teacher in her department. She positioned herself as a leader who was on top of everything, very hard-working and very demanding, whose students achieved an advanced level of English within a couple of years in an EFL context. She projected a lot of authority not only to her students, but also to her colleagues. Perhaps she did not want to lose her image of an authority figure and did not want to reveal her identities to her students, other than that of a professional, by engaging in an online activity that demanded a great deal of openness.

Deliberation: It is interesting to consider Tannis's reflection that she did not feel the instructors' presence was necessary, demonstrating her belief in student-centred learning and in telecollaboration as an activity that can potentially develop student autonomy. Despite Tannis's low participation and Natalya's complete invisibility, the interaction still evolved well. The Russian instructor's non-participation in the discussion forum demonstrates another striking example of the shaping force of instructor power and agency. As the Head of the Department, Natalya had a reputation of a very strict, demanding, and excellent instructor. Her non-participation in the project clearly shows the mismatch of her authoritarian image with the more egalitarian online space.

Thus, our reflections reveal that instructors' decisions on how to facilitate international telecollaboration – online or off-line—depend upon their personal preferences and beliefs, workload, level of computer literacy, and positioning of their instructor role within their own institutions.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study identified different types of challenges experienced by instructors mostly at the beginning stage of implementing the international project, including challenges around the issues of project structure and assessment, research vs. pedagogical agenda, ambiguity around instructor participation, and securing participation of 'have-nots.' These findings reveal the complexity of implementing an international telecollaboration involving instructors from culturally-diverse institutional contexts.

Based on the findings, we suggest improving future practice by making more transparent the visions of the project among participating parties. This is directly linked to improvement of

communication among instructors. Before the project begins, instructors should scrutinize issues such as the following:

- structured or open-ended activity

- student assessment

- dealing with computer/Internet access

- time commitment

- facilitation styles

A seemingly major source of challenges in this project was that instructors negotiated organizational issues on the surface level. However, the findings indicate that the source of challenges was much deeper and rooted in the broader socio-cultural, material, and institutional contexts from which each instructor operated. Additionally, these were also affected by the instructors' educational beliefs and personal identities.

The educational beliefs represented by the instructors of the Japanese students and the Mexican students fell within a learner-centered paradigm and the beliefs represented by the Russian instructor fell within a curricular/teacher-centered paradigm respectively (Lemke, 1998). Olga's views were ambiguous; she shared the beliefs of the Russian instructor, but she was located in the Canadian context that favoured an interactive learning paradigm. For Olga this experience was the realization of a dilemma faced by many immigrants who have to make pedagogical, research, and communication decisions in contexts which differ from their own cultural values and frames of reference.

These paradigms were catalyzed by the broader socio-cultural and material conditions of the instructors' local contexts. Many Russian students began their participation cycle in the library, continued at home where they typed their messages in a word document, saved them on a

floppy disk, posted their messages from the lab, handed in the floppy disk to their instructor for marking, and then began a new cycle. In the case of the Japanese and Mexican students, their local contexts—with free, unlimited access to the Internet—afforded them more options. For example, they interacted directly online, could make printouts of the interactions, downloaded messages from all four forums at once, and could bookmark the page and return to the bulletin board at any time. Thus, the differences in students' cultures-of-use (Thorne, 2003) of the electronic bulletin board also dictated whether they preferred structured, task-centered and teacher-directed engagement or open, egalitarian interaction shaped by the students themselves.

Thus, in planning future projects, instructors should not only propose their visions of the project, but should also explain to everyone the rationale behind them. They should inform one another of the diverse circumstances they work in, including Internet access, as well as various institutional pressures and obligations.

There should be a specific time allocated before the project for instructors to get to know one another either via e-mail or telephone conversation. In this project, e-mail communication with Natalya was sporadic, and when it took place, she sent her few messages only to Olga. One of the ways to achieve a better communication is to run a private forum where instructors can discuss emerging issues and troubleshoot as telecollaboration is taking place. This would also turn the instructor role into a more reflective one and might also help them create a sense of community, even if the instructors from contexts with limited Internet access post less frequently, but consistently.

In this study, like in any other informal online interaction, the majority of reading choices were made based on how interesting the topics were to students, not based on who posted them. Therefore, the instructors' messages could have been as easily overlooked if they were of little

interest to students. This finding points to the importance of student and teacher agency in shaping online environments and reveals the hierarchical balancing nature of the bulletin board. If teachers and students want to be heard, both parties need to learn how to be communicatively competent (Byram, 1997) in global online environments (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002).

Despite our competing beliefs, the global online interaction evolved successfully driven by students' agency. The newly emerged community consisted of a hybrid compilation of genres and participation dynamics, mediated by instructors and the affordances and constraints of their local contexts. We would like to end this article with the shared insight that the success of international telecollaborative projects, from the instructors' perspectives, is not in the absence of challenges or cultural fault lines, but in the ability to confront and overcome them through constructive negotiation of the underlying forces informing instructors' decisions as well as through mutual support.

Authors' biographical information
Olga Basharina received her PhD in Language and Literacy Education from the University of British Columbia. She is currently an adjunct faculty in the Department of Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Studies at the University of New Mexico and a full time teacher at an elementary school in Albuquerque. The interdisciplinary areas of her research interests include language and literacy development in a socio-cultural context, instructional technology, and theory and practice in teacher education.

Contact information
Department of Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Studies
MSC05 3040
1 University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001
E-mail: okb@unm.edu

Martin Guardado is a PhD candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. His research interests include first language loss and maintenance, language socialization in home, school and community settings, second language writing and technology in second language education.

Contact information

Department of Language & Literacy Education
University of British Columbia
2034 Lower Mall, Ponderosa Annex E
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
CANADA
E-mail: guardado@interchange.ubc.ca

Tannis Morgan is an instructional development consultant at the British Columbia Institute of Technology and a PhD candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. Her research centres on sociocultural perspectives of online teaching in distance education contexts.

Contact information

Learning and Teaching Centre
British Columbia Institute of Technology
3700 Willingdon Ave
Burnaby BC V5G 3H2
CANADA
E-mail: tannis_morgan@bcit.ca

Notes

[1] WebCT courseware was first developed at the University of British Columbia and is now commercially available to public and private schools and universities throughout the world. The courseware has a variety of components including web-based resources and links, an assessment grid, a calendar, private chat-rooms, and an electronic bulletin board. The different components can be put together by the instructor to provide materials and information that are specific to each course.

[2] The Japanese were international exchange students taking courses for credit. They were not enrolled in ESL courses at South-Western University, although part of their motivation for joining the exchange programme was to improve their English skills.

[3] The course taken by Japanese students - 'Introduction to Intercultural Communication' - was a language through content credit course, which focused on the exploration of various topics in language and culture including comparative cultural patterns, power relations, linguistic imperialism and colonialism, cultures in contact, and the challenges of intercultural communication.

The course taken by Mexican students - 'Advanced English: Critical thinking of Global issues' - was also a language through content course, focusing on raising global awareness and centered around the following themes: environment, mainstream and alternative media, social activism/culture jamming, cultures and subcultures, political correctness, and current global topics.

The Russian students took an English course consisting of three sections taught by different instructors: English grammar, home reading and Business English. They participated in the project instead of taking the 'Business English' section. Before the project was introduced, the emphasis of this section was on language through content, including mastering business correspondence and vocabulary.

[4] Even though the requirement to post five messages a week was not stated in the Japanese students' course outline, the project website contained this expectation. In addition, Olga, who was the Japanese students' teaching assistant and the project facilitator, informed students of this requirement during her teaching time.

[5] A decision of the Russian instructor to conduct the project during the lab time and allocate as much time to it as possible, was linked to the Russian students' lack of access to the Internet at home.

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