

Chapter 53

The Trouble With Cyberpragmatics: Embedding an Online Intercultural Learning Project Into the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on MexCo (Mexico-Coventry), an ongoing online intercultural learning project underpinned by action research. Its aim is to embed internationalisation into the curriculum of the institutions involved in order to promote citizenship competences, online intercultural communicative competence in particular, among both students and staff. The integration of telecollaboration into the curriculum has highlighted problematic aspects of the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), such as cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011). Cyberpragmatics is intended here as the skill of understanding others' intended meanings in computer-mediated communication. It is suggested that cyberpragmatics in online intercultural learning exchanges is a 'Threshold Concept' (TC) (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 375), i.e. a key concept that is troublesome to understand as it is challenging to the identity of the learner, but which could open new learning horizons to the students who do manage to grasp it.

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INTRODUCTION

The MexCo (Mexico-Coventry) online intercultural learning project has evolved from a project aimed at tandem language learning to one aimed at developing intercultural awareness and raising students' ability to operate in a "difference-friendly world" (Fraser, 1996, p. 3). It is an ongoing international intercultural knowledge-transfer exchange involving students and staff from Coventry University (School of Humanities, CU from now on) and students and staff at the Universidad de Monterrey (UDEM - Dirección de Programas Internacionales de la Universidad de Monterrey - UDEM from now on).

The project aims at making the HE curriculum at each of the partner institutions involved more intercultural and international, in keeping with their strategic priorities to encourage students to become digitally literate global citizens. At CU MexCo has been integrated into the Languages and English curriculum, while at UDEM it is part of the intercultural suite of modules offered to all courses by the international office. Both in Britain and Mexico, project MexCo aims to enhance its participants' intercultural awareness and transferable employability skills in a global context and help its participants to acquire ICC. This includes raising their awareness of the conventions of effective online engagement, or cyberpragmatics (term coined by Yus, 2011). In agreement with Stroińska and Cecchetto (2013, p.175) it is proposed here that the pragmatics of politeness proposed by Leech (1983) should be revisited in the light of Computer Mediated Communication developments. Politeness literacy for online intercultural exchanges in academic settings should become part of intercultural online awareness teaching and learning and is a digital and intercultural communicative competence *per se*. A distinctive feature of the MexCo project is that politeness literacy for online intercultural exchanges in academic settings is being explored by staff in collaboration with "Expert Students", in a model of staff-students action research developed at Coventry University (Orsini-Jones, 2015, p. 50; Orsini-Jones, Brick, & Pibworth, 2013). The "Expert Students" are students who have participated in the project in its previous cycles and appear to have grasped the complexities of ICC. They work closely with staff and enable them (staff) to see their practice through their eyes, in a role-reversal model of threshold-concept-informed curricular change (Orsini-Jones, 2013).

Through the analysis of the asynchronous interactions in the forums and the assessment of the collaborative online tasks, staff and students participating in the project are identifying problematic areas relating to intercultural communication online. The engagement with others in online exchanges requires a high level of critical multiliteracy and can prove to be challenging for undergraduate students. This leads to the hypothesis that Intercultural Communicative Competence online and online netiquette in particular is a "Threshold Concept" (TC), a concept that is troublesome to grasp for the learners as it is linked to alien knowledge that is not just alien in terms of language and epistemology (e.g. understanding what cyberpragmatics means) but also alien in terms of the identity of the learner (Orsini-Jones, 2010, p. 18). A TC forces the learners to question their assumptions, to reconfigure their learning landscape. The questioning of the learner's subjectivity brought about by the encounter with a TC, can also result in resistance to embracing the concept, not because it is difficult, but because the learner does not believe in it. The learner is not willing to engage in the transformational process that can be initiated by the engagement with troublesome knowledge, because they resist a change in identity. The challenge would therefore appear to also be ontological and relating to becoming a global citizen who can actively and respectfully communicate online with "others". The polarisation of feelings towards the "others" caused by the referendum vote for "Brexit" in June 2016 in the UK makes the raising of

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