Chapter 1.1

# ICT and Interculture Opportunities Offered by the Web

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## BACKGROUND

In Italy, as in other European countries such as Germany and France, the words "multicultural" and "intercultural" have distinct meanings[1]. In some ways the passage the one from the other indicates the evolution of a concept that, when examined in detail, forces us to re-examine educational political, and cultural choices in a society.

"In Italy, especially in the field of pedagogy, the term multicultural indicates a situation where cultures co-exist side by side but as yet, have not found a means of comparison and relating to each other . <...>. The term *intercultural*, which originated in France and then spread to other European countries, on another hand, describes a situation of interaction between different cultures, often describing a prospect, a possible point of arrival or an objective to strive for; a situation in which the people of different cultures begin to open up to reciprocal relationships, thereby bringing about the possibility of integration, characterised by a political and cultural pluralism which aims at reciprocal respect and appreciation between the respective cultures"[2]. With Multiculturalism, people accept to live with those from other cultures with tolerance but without promoting forms of exchange and democratic co-existence. The form of social organization that derives from this is that of the "melting pot" which encourages the development of ghettos or "Little Italy" and "China towns". However the Intercultural approach is reciprocal. It is for those who accept and listen, those who are tolerant, those who are not afraid of "contamination" but constantly seek to mediate between different points of view and backgrounds.

Among various other factors, it is globalization, encouraged by new communication and information technologies, that has contributed to the transformation of contemporary world-wide society into a multicultural society. These technologies have made it possible to communicate easily and at low cost with every corner of the planet. We can observe events which are taking place all over the world and take part in collective cultural processes. The Internet is made up of interconnected nodes without a centre. It encourages the growth of new trans-national communities on various levels, ranging from the political and professional to the scientific. It produced some elements of standardization, such as the use of a single language, English and has lead to uncommon social contacts on a worldwide level. At the same time however, these new communication technologies can also be viewed as a further cause of the divide between those who can access information and participate in the creation of knowledge and those who cannot.

## FOCUS

The concept of freedom of access to information is an integral part of the philosophy and history of the Internet. It is also guaranteed by the characteristics of computer mediated communication and tools such as e-mail, forums, mailing lists, blogs and portals. CMC has changed the concept of communication itself. Leaving behind the one-way logic of communicator- receiver (typical of traditional mass media) the situation has become one where individuals are nodes in a network, part of an interconnected environment. The individual has the active role of social participant in communication rather than being a passive consumer (as in the case of television).

In addition to this, there are a number of new opportunities available for the user. It is now possible to influence the information circuit significantly. People can provide information as well as obtain it, they can teach as well as learn and participate not only as an individual, but as part of a group. From the moment a person becomes aware of this new communicative reality and has the possibility of taking part in it, he or she possesses new rights and also responsibilities. The rights include the opportunity to access the Web and its contents independently of limits (economic, time, and movement) and diversity (cultural, social, cognitive, or physical). To this we can add the right to learning. This must take into consideration, not only the acquisition of technical and procedural knowledge but also cognitive, emotive and social competences which are needed in order to participate with full awareness in a form of communication which is also building knowledge. There also the ever present problem of standardized positions, so the individual must be aware of personal expectations and needs, and adopt a critical, constructive attitude and be able to question, make hypotheses, choices and checks. Moreover, it is necessary to do this in a social setting which requires emotional control and an ability to collaborate, mediate and negotiate.

The communicative environment is that of the Web where the passage between the exchange of information and the building of knowledge is potentially fast, thanks to the network that allows for an exchange rather than a one-way flow of information. This environment is one of democratic co-existence based on mutual respect. It appreciates individuality and cultural and social diversity. At the same time the right to access is also accompanied by certain responsibilities towards others. Anyone who takes part in this communicative process becomes an adherent of the philosophy of Internet. As a direct consequence of its genesis and evolution, it appears to be more closely associated with the technology of freedom rather than that of control, and with democratic relationships rather than ideological imperialism.

There are various types of free information on the web today. They can be placed into two catego-

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