Chapter 6
A Classroom with a *View*: Networked Learning Strategies to Promote Intercultural Education

Juliana E. Raffaghelli and Cristina Richieri

Introduction: A Foreshadowed Problem

This chapter explores the intercultural dimension of networked learning processes between communities from different language and cultural backgrounds. On the basis of our results it is possible to affirm that, thanks to networked learning, the above-mentioned communities are able to build new cultural spaces on the Net, thus enlarging their own cultural perspective. This may happen because networked learning can provide new strategies to work with and on diversity, which is such a widespread phenomenon in contemporary global, society. The title is to be linked to a metaphor we deliberately wanted to use: A Room with a View is a 1908 novel by the English writer E.M. Forster, about a young woman in the repressed culture of Edwardian England. Set in Italy and England, the story is both a romance and a critique of English society at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the protagonist discovers Florence and the possibilities of "looking beyond" her own culture. In the novel, the view is provided by the window. In our work, the play on words relates to the Internet, which is conceived of as a way of going beyond the walls of the classroom and the curriculum in search of other cultures, thereby helping individuals to explore otherness and reflect on one's own cultural values. This metaphor is also linked to an important concept introduced in this chapter, namely the *enlarged cultural context of learning* (Raffaghelli 2008).

Furthermore, these concepts are applied to the practical field of teacher education, since the case study is focused on teachers' key competences in dealing with diversity and new complex educational environments.

J.E. Raffaghelli (✉) • C. Richieri
Interuniversity Center of Educational Research and Advanced Training (CIRDFA),
Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy
e-mail: j.raffaghelli@unive.it; richieri.c@libero.it

Compared to other social contexts, multiculturalism has entered the classroom as a really complex phenomenon that genuinely challenges school systems (Banks 2001; Gundara 2000). The nature of the cultural "*software of mind*" (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005), through which kids, parents, and teachers read facts and practices, challenges the well-founded beliefs of traditional education: academic success, intelligence, learning performance, didactics, teaching (Banks 2001). The discussion is not new at all: in most European countries with relatively high immigration (France, Germany, Belgium, and The Netherlands) multiculturalism has been an issue since the 1950s, and since the mid-1980s the Council of Europe has promoted a number of dedicated educational projects. In these projects, education is no longer conceived of as multicultural (referring to different cultures living in the same place without any mutual interaction), rather as intercultural, with strong emphasis on reciprocity and mutual modification (Leclerq 2003). This is a strategy aimed at drawing attention to democracy, pluralism, and dialogue among different cultures. In Coulby's words: *If education is not intercultural, it is probably not education*, *but rather the inculcation of nationalist or religious fundamentalism* (2006: 246). The point here seems to be about the relationship with otherness for mutual respect, together with what this interaction implies, i.e., *cultural change*. To grasp this idea, which is the kernel of the discussion about a new concept of intercultural education, we should now recall the definition of *culture*. In anthropology it has two meanings (1) the different ways in which people living in different parts of the world classify and represent their experiences, and act creatively and (2) the evolved human capacity to classify and represent experiences through symbols, and to act imaginatively and creatively according to those shared meanings (Geertz 1973). The first definition leads us to think of culture as something rather static, like a finished, already completed entity, whereas the second, allows us to think of it as something alive, created through symbolic interaction, in a continuous meaning-making process. Indeed, while the former definition comes from anthropologists interested in defining and describing different cultures, the latter, which represents the contemporary perspective based on postmodern thinking, sees culture as an evolving entity that we can interpret. Similarly, in the educational field, the positions taken have been (a) multiculturalism, which implies a wide-spread, "normal," general culture, and minorities which exist at the same time in the same place; (b) interculturalism, which implies several cultures living together and interacting peacefully (Coulby 2006).

In the last few years, the focus has been put on new meaning-making processes and the cultural change which is taking place in the global, liquid-networked society. In fact, the Internet is becoming one of the most important places where learning occurs, no matter what educational policies are decided or what experts, headmasters, teachers, and trainers actually do (Carneiro 2007).

Nevertheless, it is only recently, that the idea that intercultural learning may also take place on the Net has been highlighted (Dunn and Marinetti 2002; Edmundson 2007; McConnell et al. 2007; Rollin and Harrap 2005; Rutheford and Kerr 2008). In this literature, the definition "culturally sensitive eLearning environments" seems to be controversial, encompassing the whole discussion about "cultural interaction/change" mentioned before. In fact, on one hand, research supports the

idea of intercultural learning through the Net, considering diversity management and instructional design in order to facilitate participation and adaptation of foreigners into eLearning courses (Edmundson 2007; Liu 2007; McLoughlin 2007; Rutheford and Kerr 2008). On the other, researchers criticize the idea of assimilation of "cultures" to national stereotypes, promoting the notion of construction of "learning cultures" on the Net (Goodfellow 2008), with its implications for the representation of learning and teaching in building shared learning design principles (McConnell 2008), the individual's construction of identity and power relations (Macfadyen 2008; Reynolds 2008).

In any case, the cultural embeddedness of the Internet needs to be disclosed from an intercultural perspective, bearing in mind that this perspective will need to be deeply revisited on the basis of those cultural spaces already existing on the Web. Moreover, we still think of education for this complex society as intercultural but our concern leads us to pose this question: will networked society change the definition of *intercultural* education, since it brings new ways of building relations and hence of *creating culture*?

The Net as a Place to Meet Equal-But-Diverse People

All people taking part in Web interaction, such as the *Screenagers* generation (Rushkof 2006), are exposed to an amazing quantity of stimuli coming from the Net and, as a result, participate in several *virtual environments* and *communities*, sharing new cultural values and behavioral patterns. If, in some cases, these patterns have been declared as foreign and extraneous to the participants, the main cyberculture studies emphasize that a new culture of cybernauts is emerging (Rheingold 1993) producing multi-identities in relation to which real life is only one of the possible sceneries where the self is forged (Turkle 1996). According to Maistrello's beautiful metaphor, these young people are citizens in new territories on the Net (Maistrello 2007). Indeed, in cyberculture studies, this problem has been considered in terms of virtual communities (Paloff and Pratt 1999), online identities (Turkle 1996), online interactions (Rovai 2002; Hewling 2006), digital discourses, access to and denial of the Internet, and the design of virtual interfaces (McLoughlin 2001; 2007). According to cyber-anthropologists' definitions, cyberspace becomes a social space in which people still meet face-to-face, even though new definitions for both "meet" and "face" are needed. In David Silver's words (2000), *while cyberspace may lack for the most part the physical geography found in, say, a neighbourhood, city, or country, it offers users very real opportunities for collective communities and individual identities*. It is worth remembering, at this point, the classical concept of *agorá*. The Greek word *agorá* comes from the verb *ageirein* meaning "to gather" and, initially, it designated the assembly of the whole people, as opposed to the council of chiefs (*boulé*). Subsequently, it came to designate the location of that assembly and what occurred there, hence its later meaning of "market-place." In Greek society, the *agorá* became an important place which represented mainly democracy. Moreover,

it was the place which offered the possibility of communicating, learning, and exchanging not only goods but also ideas. In fact, in Aristotle's ideal city, the *agorá* represents the life of the city as it is separated into two domains: the vulgar, for business and commerce, and the free *agorá* for more serious political, intellectual, and religious activities (*Politics, 13331a31*). Thus, it seems clear that the *agorá* is what people build through intense participation, rather than, a simple localized, architectonic place.

We could conclude that meeting people from several cultural backgrounds and experiences on the Net is possible through the new contextualization of interaction in the symbolic place provided by virtual learning environments and networks.

If people are given the opportunity of creating meaning through engagement and participation in group activities, then a cultural manifestation takes place, introducing the prospect of cultural change. Based on this assumption, we could affirm that the possibility of establishing interactions which might lead to the creation of a virtual space on the Net – like an *agorá* – could promote more than *intercultural* learning (as a relation between two separated entelechies). In fact, this kind of new space could be culturally inclusive through the process of cultural change, emphasizing the dimension of the Web as a *third space*, a dimension, it could be argued, that gives people the opportunity of practicing dialogue, discovering the relativity of one's own cultural position, and being engaged in new hybrid culture creation.

Our point here is that, even if *possible*, the above result is not necessarily automatic. Indeed, it requires a critical position and awareness of what is happening while the subject is involved in intercultural relations on the Net. In that sense, there is shared construction but also reflective deconstruction of one's own cultural values and personal positions, as well as otherness recognition. In our view, these elements are necessary in order to bring about an intercultural dimension within global networked learning.

Reconceptualizing the Intercultural Dimension Within the Framework of Networked Learning

The notion of networked learning encompasses the idea of connection between learning communities and resources, by enhancing information and communication technologies (Goodyear et al. 2004). This concept goes far beyond the access to virtual learning spaces, resources, or facilities provided by technologies to improve communication. Based on the belief that learning is a social practice, this concept implies participation and transformation of reality (Jones 2008). It can be assumed that Networked learning is not an individual process, but a joint activity carried out through *connectedness* (Zenios and Goodyear 2008). In global society, it necessarily introduces the concept of difference as an element embedded in every single interaction, creating situations where difference could be recognized or not. In global multicultural networks, Networked learning should emphasize Bruner's idea about education as *forum* where culture is not transmitted but generated through

interaction (Bruner 2005). In other words, difference leads to the creation of *new learning cultures* (Goodfellow 2008).

This is not an automatic result: participating in such interconnected, creative learning cultures encompasses a specific attitude to be put on by the individual in order to let learning take place, namely being aware of the necessity of otherness to carry out one's own lifelong learning project (Bowskill et al. 2008). This implies that new educational contexts have the not easy task of helping the individual to acknowledge the limits of oneness and the crucial value of differences which distinguish each individual, as "*a pedagogy which makes difference invisible is poor training for engaging with* '*global world*'" (Asmar 2005). In fact, it is through the very process of differentiation from as well as of identification with others that individuals are able to grow up, develop, and form their own identity (Koole 2010). This construction of the self takes place in a "*continual cycle of reciprocity between self and community*" (Koole 2010: 242) by means of relational dialogue which brings about a constant mutual transformational process, which is the ground where learning takes place.

Being aware of the need for otherness is only the first step toward this idea of learning. What educational contexts should provide for the individual to develop is a learning environment in which he/she can discover and practice how to take part effectively in a learning community. This implies the development of specific competences: being able to listen to the others actively (Gordon 1977), being able to reflect on the gains produced by interaction, and being able to acknowledge the role of otherness in one's own learning process (Mezirow 1991). Thus, it is a matter of training the individual to look for authentic communication with otherness and implementing educational strategies aimed at establishing wefts of positive interdependence between individuals.

These considerations about how to take part in learning communities have been central when disclosing diversity as intrinsic to every human group, in a critical, postcolonial and feminist approach. They may well be applied to Networked learning, hence avoiding a too far extended vision of *intrinsic goodness of international/global communities on the Net* (Reynolds 2008).

Research in the field of Networked learning has considered the issue of intercultural embededdness of learning processes within international groups (Macfadyen et al. 2004; Goodfellow and Lamy 2009). From one hand some works introduce empirical evidence which shows that online interaction, when carried out through written posts/texts/messages, offers the opportunity to pondering over what is being communicated since the posts/texts/messages can be re-read, both before sending them and after receiving them (Hewling 2006; Macfadyen 2008), thus fostering true mutual understanding, especially when the use of a foreign language is involved. Moreover, according to this research line, being exposed to contexts which are different from one's own (otherwise, why should online interaction be used to promote international exchanges?), encourages the assumption of different perspectives toward reality and helps understand one's own existential postures by detecting in other individuals' culture what is different from and what is similar to one's own (Macfadyen 2008).

On the other hand, some authors have focused on the need to understand intercultural relations in global networked learning experiences from a critical point of view, since elements such as learning design (McConnell 2008; Morse 2003) and pedagogical conceptions of teaching and learning (McConnell 2008; Zhang and Huang 2008) could influence the sense of engagement and genuine interaction with otherness. In fact, social status and power lies behind every human group, and online environments are not exceptions (Hodgson and Reynolds 2005).

In any case, research covering international networked learning processes, emphasizes the fact that, by being exposed to other individuals' experiences of the world, everyone enacts his/her learning, and this is much more evident in Net-based multicultural interactions where networked learning is produced by the encounter of macroscopically different cultures. However, authors in this research tradition point out, consistently with the above conception of culture on the Net as a dynamic process, that identifying culture with nationality (Hofstede 2001; Hall 1959, 1960; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000) is not of great use since "*Characterising individuals culturally as homogeneous microcosms of particular (different) nation states belies the complexity and significance of individual difference and experience in the social process of being human and of learning*" (Hewling 2008: 570).

So, what takes place in intercultural networked learning processes implies much more than simply thinking of instructional design needs or diversity management. With the growing phenomenon of hybrid cultures on the Net, like "*Screenagers*," we should think of a new pedagogical approach, where critical deconstruction of symbols and cultural positions would lead to equity, expression of diversity, and participation in the construction of new meaning.

A Case Study

The experience discussed in this chapter was part of an international cooperation project called PERMIT. The research was based on a participant/constructivist approach. This meant that the research team took part in the process of developing e-learning strategies and designing an online platform that allowed 24 teachers from Italy, Turkey, and Slovenia to interact in order to carry out the piloting of the activities developed within the PERMIT project during a school year. The experimentation consisted in creating learning activities that would allow an intercultural perspective within the topics tackled with the students.

The underlying assumption was that networked learning which emphasized the exploration of diversity and engagement in creating new *shared learning cultures* through international peer support and joint collaboration, would reshape teaching practices toward the development of intercultural sensitivity. In this sense, we drew on Bennet's definition (1993), where intercultural sensitivity is supposed to evolve from more ethnocentric positions to ethnorelative ones, envisioning the importance of networked learning as an opportunity to experiencing otherness. Furthermore, if

we consider the key role played by a teacher's professional and existential identity in effective teaching (Beijaard et al. 2004; OECD-TALIS 2009), it seems reasonable to assume that his/her own intercultural sensitivity would lead to opportunities for his/her students to enrich their learning processes with intercultural sensitivity.

Based on such a constructivist, mixed-methods approach, the key stages of the above-mentioned approach were

- *Learning design and training process*. One of the researchers (who played the role of a participant researcher) took part in the process of developing e-learning strategies and designing the international online platform where teachers and students interacted.
- *Follow-up*. The community made up of twenty four teachers worked online for 6 months, participating in three international residential workshops (three days each) and sharing the Virtual Working/Learning Space every day (*).
- *Questionnaires* were administered to the whole group, while some of the members of the group were *interviewed* during the actual learning process.
- *Participation in Italian monitoring*. Focus group with students.
- *Participation in students VWLS*. Teachers' implementation of a VWLS to be used by their own students.
  (*) The VLE consisted of three areas – International Teachers Community; National – Italian, Turkish, Slovenian – Teachers' Community; Students' Community – divided by subjects, with an interdisciplinary approach, "Languages Community (LC)," "Humanities Community (HC)," "Sciences Community (SC)." Inside these communities, the following activities were analyzed: Italian Teachers' Community (nine online forum and one activity of geolocalization); International Teachers' Community: seven online forum; Students' Community: eight online forum (HC); seven online forum (LC); three online forum (SC). Analysis of online discourse and structure of online learning spaces was made considering the semantic categories (codes) emerging from those materials, which is the most superficial level of qualitative analysis.

An initial data set, relating to the contextualization of intervention and justification of the strategies adopted in introducing a virtual learning space, was collected through questionnaires and analyzed using very simple descriptive statistics. A second set of data, relating to the process of creation, implementation and impact of virtual working/learning space for PERMIT teachers and students, required mostly qualitative analysis: free and axial codification of interview transcriptions, focus group interaction, open written answers in the questionnaires and excerpts from the online forum. The aim was to create a conceptual map of the processes of meaning creation emerging from the learning community. The resulting codification guided us toward further conceptualization and confrontation with the initial project goals and suppositions made by the group about research questions*: What actually happens when people from different cultural backgrounds are engaged in networked learning processes? Is it possible to influence learners' cultural identities and sense of belonging, thereby opening possibilities*

to new learning cultures? These initial general questions would lead to a more specific question about the focus of the case, which would help explore the impact of this global networked learning model on local practices: *Is it possible to influence teachers' practices toward an intercultural perspective of teaching through this model?*

PERMIT Online Learning Space: What Can We Do to Get Teachers Involved in an Intercultural Vision of Their Own Practice?

The PERMIT project aimed at promoting the Civil Society Dialogue between the European Union and Turkey with a specific focus on ensuring better knowledge and understanding of Turkey within the European Union. From the beginning, this goal was transformed by the Scientific Committee into a more significant and representative one, aimed at promoting a process of mutual learning from practice and reflection upon partners' cultural identities in the context of inducing the development of intercultural sensibility. As a result, the following working hypothesis was designed: *Intercultural awareness among researchers, teachers and students involved in the project (samples 10, 100, 800) is presumed to be low. The innovation in teaching methodologies and materials is expected to enhance researchers, teachers and students' awareness of cultural diversity and its understanding, as a dimension of intercultural sensitivity.* An important issue was raised in carrying out the project, namely the need to work out a successful teacher training program which would have an impact on the intercultural dimension, based on the latest conceptions on continuing teacher training. The idea had been expressed from the very first discussions about training methodology, as interweaving formal learning (seminars and e-learning) with teachers' expertise, i.e., linking their practical knowledge (non-formal learning), considered as a process of reflection, to practice recognized on an academic level. Discussions and processes of mutual understanding between teachers from several cultures were then fundamental to generate individual teaching projects for subsequent classroom implementation. The training strategy was based on the implementation of three international collaborative seminars followed by online activities that were designed to accompany experimental teaching activities. The process started from the negotiation of content and the training approach by the three teams of trainers from Slovenia, Turkey, and Italy. From the beginning, the need to take responsibility was emphasized by the Research/Training group. Consequently, every teacher was asked to produce learning units to be implemented in their classes, making use of common strategies (belonging to the large PERMIT framework) in order to implement intercultural dialogue. Discussions between teachers generated individual learning units. Furthermore, the groups of teachers were supported in their decision-taking process by academics who brought

research trends in intercultural education developed in the three countries involved. It was assumed that only through collaboration in both international plenary sessions and broad subject groups could the teachers create learning units deriving from both their best practices and innovation. Hence, intercultural strategies within pedagogical practices were going to emerge from existing strengths and the extension of the vision of what was feasible. It was assumed that only through collaboration, in both plenary sessions and in broad subject groups of teachers from different countries and from different kinds of school, could new approaches and lesson schemes be forged out of their combined best practices. Intercultural strategies within pedagogical practices would therefore emerge from existing strengths and extensions of the vision of what was possible. The need to give continuity to the process launched through the workshops was immediately evident. How could participants from several different countries and realities give continuity to their collaboration? The teachers and their materials needed to *go virtual*.

Creating the Virtual Working/Learning Space: What Kind of Place Do We Need on the Net to Give Continuity to Teachers' Cross-border Debates?

According to the initial discussion above, and considering the further training hypothesis implied in the project, the VWLS (also called *The Space*) had been given significant attention from the very first seminar. *The Space* was set up to keep the aims and objectives of the project at the forefront, and to store the information the teachers might need in addition to their teaching materials. *The Space* was also conceived as a way of giving supportive empathy to those teachers looking for colleagues' help with their creative process.

Within *The Space* (inspired by the above mentioned idea of Agorà) the teachers were not seen simply as downloaders of information. Instead, they were perceived of as *uploaders*, considering Web 2.0 philosophy, since artifacts, tools, and spaces were progressively going to be shaped by teacher-led intervention and published in *The Space*. Coherently with this, teacher's professionalism was envisaged as a process of critical deconstruction of one's own practices/knowledge, whereby the teacher becomes a reflective practitioner (Schön 1983), who obtains a deep understanding of the discipline through teaching (Margiotta 2007; Whitehead and McNiff 2006). So, he/she becomes the author of his/her own teaching resources and strategies. This active and reflective approach was supported by both the possibility of publishing contributions on the Net very easily, and the subsequent collaboration with colleagues and students made possible by Web tools. This process of cross-border collaboration and critical deconstruction with peers from several different cultures would induce the development of intercultural sensitivity through (a) one's own and other people's cultural awareness; (b) decentralization of the conception of one's own subject and practices, toward a more ethnorelative position (implying the
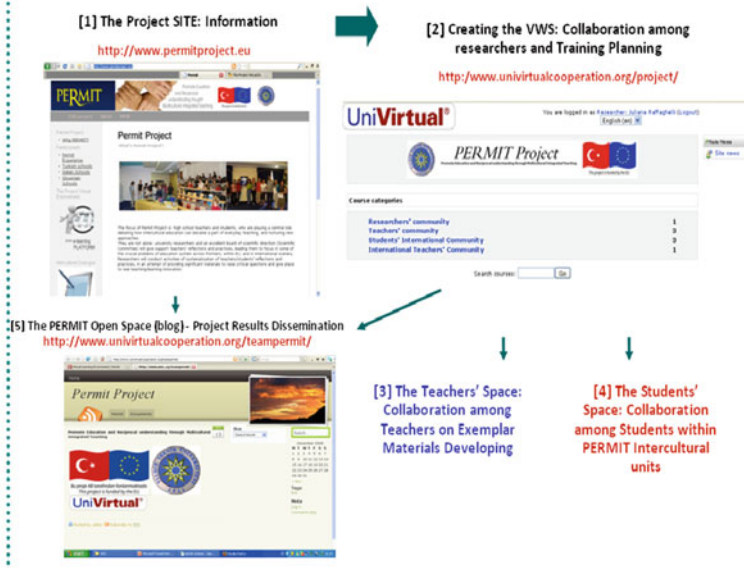
Fig. 6.1 Original idea of *The Space*

acceptance of self as part of a broader picture, moving beyond local practice). *The Space* was designed to reflect this idea of professional development and to adhere to the above mentioned training strategies. Figure 6.1 explains the structure and areas in *The Space*.

In this figure, the several spaces making up the general "geography" of "The Space" (the virtual Agorà) are shown. The figure also makes it clear how these virtual working areas are linked to each other for several purposes: information, communication, and learning.

According to the principles of Web 2.0, extremely simple software was used to provide the users with several user-interface, software and storage facilities, all through their browser, thereby using the web as a "platform" (O'Reilly 2005). These characteristics were supposed to make the users' experience on the Net more direct and spontaneous. The VWLS was built by integrating Drupal (release 6.0) and Moodle (release 1.9). While the news and the project site ran on Drupal, discussions and learning activities were placed on Moodle. A blog on WordPress was eventually used to contain the final version of work, while videos and photos were embedded into an e-learning platform Moodle by using You Tube, Flickr, and Picasa Web Albums.

Implementing the VWLS

Figure 6.2 shows the development of the project throughout its various phases. A set of online modules was proposed to the teachers as part of their training, but the main activity was to upload their own materials and to collaborate in the implementation of pilot classroom experiences.

The online modules were connected to the project development phases as follows:

The First Phase was devoted to the understanding of the guiding principles of the PERMIT Project in order to start the developing of PERMIT Learning Units. The online modules were connected to (a) in-depth understanding of the problem of intercultural pedagogy (Cultural Values influencing Schooling System); (b) teachers' skills in enacting reflection and collaboration across frontiers (use of Portfolio to develop reflection on intercultural teaching practice; use of tools to participate within a virtual learning environment).

The Second Phase was devoted to the implementation of PERMIT Units in class. Online modules were focused on (a) Presentation and Analysis of PERMIT units Learning Design through self assessment and peer discussion; (b) Web tools to
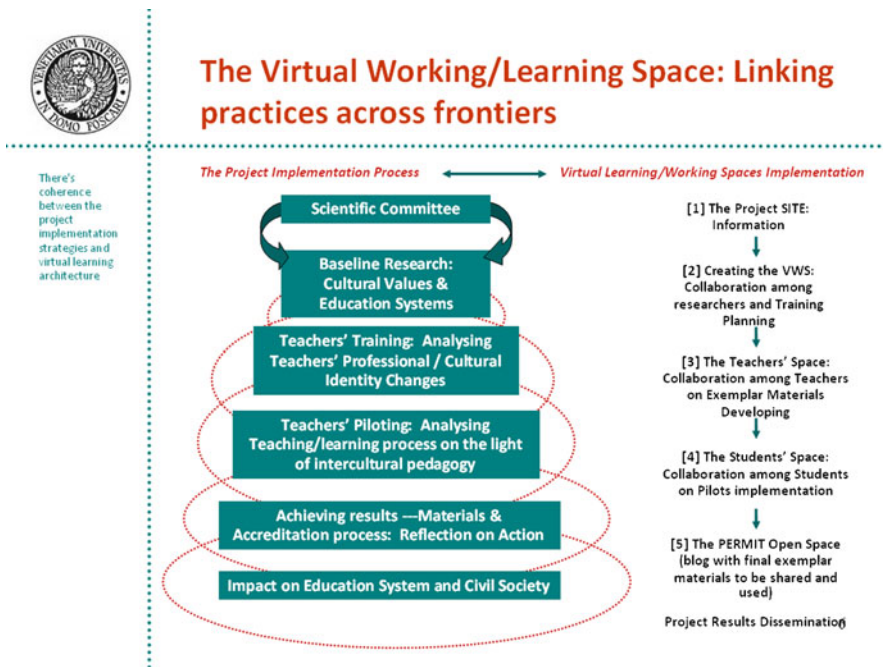
Fig. 6.2 The coherence between project development and the construction of *The Space*

let students interact across frontiers; (c) the Use of Portfolio to introduce inter-
cultural competence self assessment (understanding the level of intercultural
sensitivity development).

The Third Phase was focused on the evaluation of the results achieved by the
students in class. Online modules were to deal with Reflections on Effective
Intercultural Teaching ("My best Lesson").

The Fourth and closing phase was dedicated to the dissemination of results in wider
teachers' communities.

Consequently, implementation was progressive and organic in a context of
bottom-up logic, as the spaces were shaped in accordance with the groups' needs.
The analysis of the training phases, FTF and the online learning activities (from the
first to the third residential seminar) allows us to understand how *The Space* became
something more than an e-learning platform in the sense of being merely a struc-
tured space for formal learning activities, without any connection with experimental
practice and emotional engagement. In fact, it evolved into a space for experimenta-
tion and the sharing of reflection on the *meanings* emerging from practice, prior to
discussion in residential meetings.

The red dotted lines indicate the progressive process of building the third cultural
space on the Web. The cultural space starts from interaction and continues to impact
on other social/cultural dimensions.

Outcomes I: The VWLS as the Matrix of Shared Knowledge

The teachers piloted ideas, developed through a networked learning process, in their
own classes. The following data comes from 19 questionnaires delivered through an
online form at the end of each working session ("After Training Questionnaires");
the respondents were the teachers from the three countries involved in the project.
The main result to emerge from the above mentioned questionnaire was that 92% of
the respondents thought the VWLS was a useful tool for developing an intercultural
professional identity, mainly because:

> […] It gave us the opportunity to see other colleagues' didactic approaches, compare teach-
> ing perspectives, spark ideas, give help to other teachers, sharing materials […] (Slovenian
> teacher).

> […] The platform was generally considered useful for giving teachers the idea of a working
> group "across frontiers", eliminating national barriers and borders; as it means a lot to stu-
> dents too, especially when they see that in so many schools their peers do the same pilots,
> and come up with similar or very original questions! […] (Italian teacher).

> […] Because for cancelling the contours and the borders of the bodies and the brains, it is
> more necessary and usefull to come together than the other technologic methods in opinion
> me […] (Turkish teacher).

Participating in an international community of teachers and students had an
impact on personal practice, because it was an opportunity to work with people
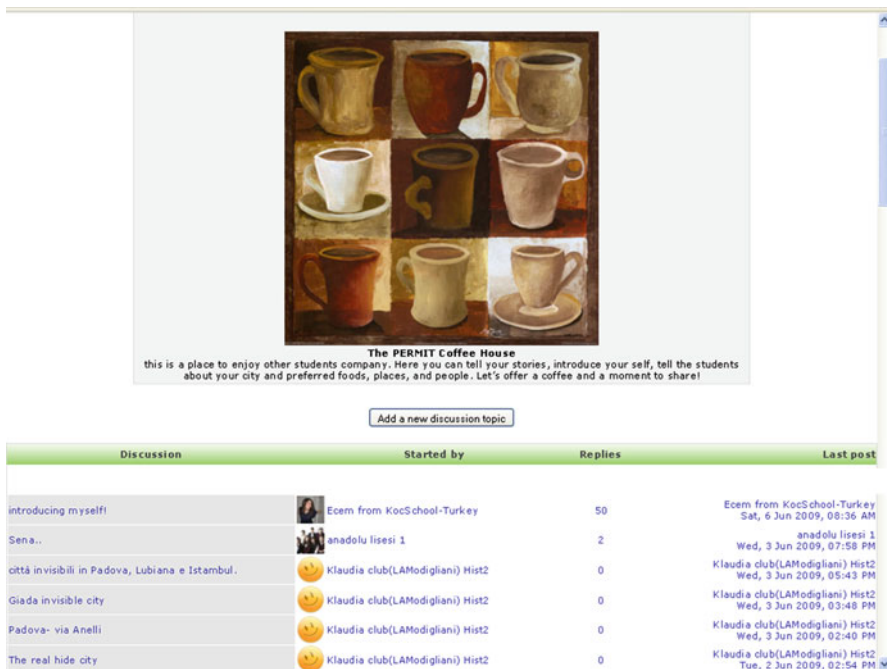
from different educational contexts, bound together by certain ideas and beliefs. The PERMIT international teachers' community was made possible by *The Space*, whose virtual representation could be considered a semiotic representation of a meeting place (where iconicity and symbolism of shared words become "things" of common use). The platform could be therefore considered as an instrument supporting some of the crucial processes of the PERMIT approach: the sharing of experiences and working models, the opening of a window on communication between students and teachers from the many contexts involved in the project. Nevertheless, the potential of this kind of tool is still to be developed. Some teachers reported:

> […] The Space was somehow the "storage space" […] and its proper value and the purpose is about to come; The Space was important and it can become more important if it becomes a means of communication amongst students and teachers; [I] think it should be implemented for the relation between students […] (Turkish teacher).

> […] Technical barriers as equipments and teachers' skills are a problem to face if this kind of instrument is to be used […] (Italian teacher).

Outcomes II: The Sense-Making Process – Building Metaphors for Intercultural Dialogue

Metaphors are forms of language expressing shared sense-making processes, since they stimulate a "double process of semantic mapping," through the operation of linking one category to another, and thus condensing meaning (Lakoff and Jonhson 1980; Mercer 2000). Metaphoric thinking is also deeply rooted by images (Lakoff and Jonhson 1980). This cognitive assumption could make the use of metaphors frequent in intercultural conversation. Between the second and third phase of teacher training and experimentation, metaphors started to circulate among the teachers and their classes (while communicating across frontiers), as part of the process of negotiating meaning, and in the effort to come to an understanding with otherness, but also as a way of generating a common context for intervention. A first metaphor, "The PERMIT Coffee House" (see Fig. 6.3), which identified the online forum, was conceived in order to meet the international group's need to create a "meeting point" where to have free, informal interactions. This metaphor was launched through an image which illustrated the students' area and the diversity which it could contain. The teachers discussed the pros and cons of this proposal at the International Teachers Community (Plenary Discussions Forum, from Interaction 11 to Interaction 18: six participants). The main problem faced by the teachers was the perception of the risks involved in (a) allowing *The Space* too loose a connection with planned learning activities; (b) keeping a check on students' behavior even in this place – which is both in and out of school. The teachers decided to allow free contact among the students. This decision had a positive impact, since the Coffee House allowed the students to get to know some aspects of their foreign peers' everyday life, and supported their reflection on lifestyles and identities in different cultures. Feedback activities revealed the strong impact on some Italian students:

Fig. 6.3 A metaphor for an informal place of meeting

[…] We would never imagine that a Turkish girl could be a Physician's daughter, and that she could have travelled the world more than we did […] (Vocational Training School, Mestre, 14 May 2009).

[…] Reading about the life of these kids, I realized that their likes, their thoughts, their fears, are very similar to those of mine […] (Vocational Training School, Mestre, 14 May 2009).

[…] The insertion of the piece in the puzzle is a good example of the relationship that has emerged between the Italian students and the foreign students, Turkish and Slovenian, of PERMIT project. In fact, this project is a puzzle that has been completed, and that established an important and constructive link among three very different cultures, that at the same time are together in wishing to know each other and wanting to understand each other. To me, Permit Project has been an important springboard to a deeper knowledge of cultures different from mine […] (Art School, Padova, 28 May 2009).

The Humanities group produced another significant metaphor, that of the "Skyline" (the shape of a city seen against the skyline at sunset). The "Skyline" was used by the teachers and the students to represent themselves to the others. Linked to this idea, the Skyline was the first metaphorical image easily shared despite the communication difficulties linked to trying to use English as a "lingua franca" (the Humanities group, being formed by people with very different disciplinary and experiential backgrounds, suffered intensely from this difficulty in negotiating sense within a common project). At first, the teachers agreed to exchange their own photos of their home city. They subsequently began to ask their students to take pictures,

reflect on the "shapes and shadows," as visible and invisible parts of their own city, and therefore reflect on the "shapes and shadows" of other PERMIT cities. This phase was followed by the introduction of the theme "The cities" in the Lesson Plan of very different subjects, such as Design (as a *mood board* for fashion design), Literature (as a starting point for producing literary texts and introducing Italo Calvino's work *Invisible Cities*), Art (as a starting point for the study the works of art in the cities involved in the program), History (as a means of stimulating the study of the historical context of certain buildings acting as a link between cities in different countries).

The cognitive mapping process produced by this metaphor was also extended to other categories to represent intercultural dialogue, for example, the metaphor of the iceberg, which suggests the idea of what is visible of one's own intercultural identity, and what is invisible, hidden under water.

This impregnation of common images through the students' production and the teachers' reflection on their students' work, was a clear representation of the cognitive and emotional effort made in building a common narrative of cross-border and disciplinary practice. Thanks to free negotiation and consensus as opposed to the constraints of curricula or external coordination, an intercultural context for common practice was created.

This is the introducing page to the PERMIT Coffee House created by a teacher.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore three different points:

- The results of the process of networked learning which takes place between people from different cultural backgrounds having to interact for work purposes (hence generating concrete outcomes for their respective professional contexts).
- To what extent it is possible to conceive the idea of influencing teachers' original cultural identity with the aim of bringing about a sense of belonging to an enlarged learning culture – a community of teachers across frontiers connected by the Web.
- The possibility of developing and fostering teachers' practices toward an intercultural perspective of teaching as an extension and impact of the two previous points.

From the results we obtained, it emerged that the networked learning process generated a perception among the teachers (and later among the students, too) of the centrality of *The Space* as a tool and a place of communication which supported a sense of cross-border community. In fact, the chance of knowing other *glocal* realities, and communicating with them through the use of a virtual space was considered by the participants not only relevant, but also crucial from the perspective of dialogue with otherness and *disclosing and exploring diversity*. All the teachers emphasized the motivation and curiosity showed by their students about the different

realities taking part in the PERMIT experience, seeing *The Space* as a window to look "*outside the walls of the classroom/curriculum*" (Teachers internal meeting, Venice, 15 May 2009). After a while, this produced a local effect, as reflection affected *praxis*: teachers stressed the need to enhance this motivation for educational innovation in class and at school, by introducing common activities across frontiers, and the students themselves asked to carry on taking part in *The Space* in order to communicate with peers from other countries. This interest shows how narrow the space offered by the classroom (physically delimited) and the curriculum (symbolic delimitation) is becoming: in fact, what the students and the teachers were asking for was a new *territory (in the sense of symbolic spaces for a connected self)*, the only frontiers of which are the limits of *imagination* (in the sense of a multimodal representation of sense-making processes) This is where the Web can play a role, not as a technological device, but as a semiotic space capable of creating the coordinates of an *enlarged cultural context*.

Networked learning – as part of a wider training vision – seems to offer the possibility of featuring symbols and iconicity in a significant way. As a result, the recognition and the resignification of cultural symbols and metaphors belonging to other cultures create *new contexts which allow new narratives*, as emphasized by Sharples et al. (2007: 231):

> […] learning not only occurs in a context, it also creates context through continual interaction. The context can be temporarily solidified, by deploying or modifying objects to create supportive work space, or forming an ad hoc social network out of people with shared interests, or arriving at a shared understanding of a problem […].

This could match our attempt to raise awareness of the need for a critical approach of the potential of networked learning for introducing an intercultural dimension into teaching/learning processes. The evidence about the construction, use and impact of VWLS collected within the PERMIT experience, shows a process of creation of a semiotic space, a place where re-interpretation of one's own experience occurs, followed by new common narrative. This process seems to motivate people to participate in international online communities aimed at achieving a vision of otherness, as they seem to perceive themselves as outside a specific cultural context: a new symbolic representation that goes beyond *my place* – with my own cultural rules – or *yours*. By means of *electronic conversation* this place becomes a third, new place. Furthermore, the fact that the process is crystallized in electronic texts and icons, we are allowed to believe that diversity is discovered, explored and kept in the memory before reaching *thirdness*. We could conclude that networked learning is a kind of learning that takes place in *enlarged cultural contexts*, thus causing the reformulation of the concept of *inter* cultural learning. This implies the creation of a context by several cultural identities, rather than by fixed entities that exchange meaning. This new context generates a sense of belonging to a wider project, a territory where virtual/planetary citizenship can be implemented. Of course, this is rather utopian, even because cyberspace can house symbolic violence as well as real places do. Consequently, we are aware that participation based on a bottom-up logic is not enough to produce new learning cultures, since thoughtful and critical

guidance to a participatory approach is necessary to support the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural meaning.

Will these encounters in online spaces have an impact on local spaces? This question, the kernel of new education (comprehensive of networked learning as well as intercultural education) certainly requires further research. The metaphors emerged and shared by the teachers and the students about their common teaching and learning activities were supported by *The Space*; they were hence transferred into local classrooms, promoting continuity in the sense-making process from virtual (global) to FTF (face-to-face or local). In fact, connections among teachers and students supported by technologies led the participants to achieve emotional engagement, confrontation and concrete experience that allowed them to build new discourses about diversity. *The Space* in the PERMIT project, suggesting the idea of a *place* where to meet (an *agorá*), generated the perception of a room where people introduced their diversity to the others, shared activities and goals, and recognized otherness. Perhaps this gave the participants the idea of a classroom without walls, an enlarged cultural context where intercultural dialogue, and further cultural construction could take place: *a classroom with a view*.

In the light of these conclusions, we can highlight further questions that could shape future practice:

- From the perspective of networked learning, how can teachers work with their colleagues to help them develop their understanding of intercultural education in all their different subject areas?
- Are teachers likely to want to give time to building new discourses about diversity when they are often overworked and when they have to "cram" so much into the curriculum?
- How can teachers be helped to achieve this much-needed perspective on intercultural learning and teaching?

Teachers need to become aware of the importance of managing complexity induced by diversity at any level of learning experience. Teachers' effectiveness depends on this awareness, which can generate appropriate educational actions.

Considering the positive impact on intercultural sensitivity generated by the PERMIT project by spreading international residential seminars blended with networked learning over lengthy periods of time, similar experiences should be shared and disseminated, in order to let new teachers know the educational gains brought about by meeting otherness on the Net, and promote their participation in similar activities. Furthermore, academics, researchers and teacher trainers should help them investigate their own discipline's epistemology in international networked learning activities, both as pre-service and in-service training opportunities in which teachers can reflect on those dimensions of their discipline that can be affected by intercultural sensitivity and competence.

For example, the European Commission is providing a policy context to promote teachers' professional mobility (Comenius Projects: Lifelong Learning Programme, Strategic Priorities, 2010). Thus, introducing a perspective of the type explored in this chapter can certainly improve outcomes in terms of teachers' professionalism.

Further Implications for Research

Our empirical work represents an attempt to collect evidence about networked learning as a process of culture construction, where otherness can be effectively represented, explored, and deconstructed in order to generate new meaning.

In our view, the need to think of networked learning as an opportunity to expand one's own cultural context through active participation in its construction opens up the possibility of research on new modes of using connections (with people and with multimodal resources on the Net). The aim is to produce learning cultures as a further result of learning processes.

Research in this field supports this perspective by elaborating on the evolution of the concept of "intercultural" learning on the Net. For example, Goodfellow (2008) explores a mosaic of positions, like "providing culturally appropriate instruction on virtual learning environments"; the role of language and intercultural communication in foreign languages in building understanding, especially where cultural backgrounds are supported only by reduced cues within electronic medium; studies that emphasize the emergence of new cultural and social identities in virtual learning communities which draw on contemporary cybercultures and their role in shaping individual cultural identities. He concludes that, even when these studies draw on broader, interdisciplinary approaches, such as cultural theory, language and semiotics, and instructional design, they seem focused on "*problems of designing and implementing e-learning for non-western consumers, with the majority of accounts coming from the US and other Anglophone contexts*" (Goodfellow 2008: 555).

It is clear that future research on cultural embededdness of networked learning experiences needs to go beyond instructional design (tailored courses for foreigners), even if this perspective cannot be abandoned completely (Banks et al. 2008).

The balance among "new learning culture" discourses and the representation of multiple voices in a network is delicate and difficult. Further research might investigate how emerging new learning cultures represent diversity effectively, in an attempt to answer the questions: what has been lost in adopting some of the new cultures and why? Connections and nodes (people or resources) that can superficially give the idea of a "smooth" learning experience need to be deconstructed in order to understand both the individual's intercultural sensitivity, as well as power and dominant discourses which may neglect the expression of diversity.

It seems that reflections and theoretical research have explored the question to some extent. Nevertheless, we are today observing an impressive use of virtual environments to cross national/local frontiers, not only in higher education (on which the majority of studies seem to have focused) but also at other levels of formal education, such as our own experience, and in other informal and nonformal learning contexts.

As a consequence, we believe there is a clear need for more empirical evidence and reflection on networked learning in the *enlarged cultural context.*

References

Asmar, C. (2005). Internationalising students: Reassessing diasporic and local student difference. *Studies in Higher Education, 30* (3), 291–309; quoted by Reynolds, Perspectives… 2008, p. 732.

Banks, J. A. (2001). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Banks, Sh., McConnell, D., Bowskill, N. (2008). A feeling or a practice? Achieving interculturality in an elearning course. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 712–719). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Banks_712-719.pdf

Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). *Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity*. Leiden: Institutional Repository Leiden University, Leiden University. Retrieved December 23, 2010, from https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/11190

Bennet, M. J. (1993). Towards a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R. Michael Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Bowskill, N., McConnell, D., & Banks, S. B. (2008). Reflective practices in intercultural e-tutor teams: A UK-Sino case study. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 707–711). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/abstracts/PDFs/Bowskill_707-711.pdf

Bruner, J. S. (2005). *La mente a più dimensioni*. Bari: Editori Laterza [Original title *Actual Minds, Possible Words*, 1986]. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Carneiro, R. (2007). The big picture: Understanding learning and meta-learning challenges. *European Journal of Education, 42* (2), 151–172.

Coulby, D. (2006). Intercultural education: Theory and practice. *International Education, 17* (3), 245–257.

Dunn, P., & Marinetti, A. (2002). *Cultural adaptation: Necessity for eLearning*. Retrieved September 10, 2010 from http://www.linezine.com/7.2/articles/pdamca.htm

Edmundson, A. (Ed.). (2007). *Globalized e-learning cultural challenges*. Hershey: Information Science Publishing.

Geertz, C. (1973 [2000]). *The interpretation of cultures*, New York: Basic Books.

Goodfellow, R. (2008). New directions in research into learning cultures in online education. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 553–559). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Goodfellow_553-559.pdf

Goodfellow, R., & Lamy, M. N. (2009). *Learning cultures in online education*. London: Continuum.

Goodyear, P., Avgeriou, P., Baggetun, R., Bartoluzzi, S., Retalis, S., Ronteltap, F. et al. (2004). Towards a pattern language for networked learning. In S. Banks, P. Goodyear, V. Hodgson, C. Jones, V. Lally, D. McConnell, & C. Steeples (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Fourth International Networked Learning Conference*. Retrieved September 4, 2010, from http://networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2004/proceedings/individual_papers/goodyear_et_al.htm

Gordon, T. (1977). *Leader effectiveness training*. New York: Wyden.

Gundara, J. (2000). *Interculturalism, education and inclusion*. London: Paul Chapman.

Hall, E. T. (1959). *The silent language*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.

Hall, E. T. (1960). *The hidden dimension*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.

Hampden-Turner, C., & Trompenaars, F. (2000). *Building cross cultural competence: How to create wealth from conflicting values*. Chichester: Wiley.

Hewling, A. (2006). Culture in the online class: Using message analysis to look beyond nationality-based frames of reference. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*, 337–356.

Hewling, A. (2008). Culture ecologies in online education. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 569–573). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 10, 2010 from http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/organisations/netlc/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Hewling_569-573.pdf

Hodgson, V., & Reynolds, M. (2005). Community, difference and networked learning designs. In V. Hodgson, L. Perriton, & M. Reynolds (Eds.), *Community and networked learning (Studies in Higher Education), 30(1)*, 11–24.

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hofstede, G., & Hofstede, G. J. (2005). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind (Revised and expanded 2nd)*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Jones, C. (2008). Networked learning – A social practice perspective. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 616–623). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 4, 2010, from http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Jones_616-623.pdf

Koole, M. (2010). The web of identity: Selfhood and belonging in online learning networks. *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Networked Learning 2010* (pp. 241–248). ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2. Retrieved September 4, 2010, from http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/organisations/netlc/past/nlc2010/abstracts/PDFs/Koole.pdf

Lakoff, G., & Jonhson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University Chicago Press.

Leclerq, J. (2003). *Facets of interculturality in education*. Strasbourg: The Council of Europe Publishing.

Liu, Y. (2007). Designing quality online education to promote cross-cultural understanding. In A. Edmundson (Ed.), *Globalized e-learning cultural challenges* (pp. 35–39). London: Information Science Publishing.

Macfadyen, L. P., Roche, J., & Doff, S. (2004). *Communicating across cultures in cyberspace: A bibliographical review of online intercultural communication*. Hamburg: Lit-Verlag.

Macfadyen, L. P. (2008). Constructing ethnicity and identity in the online classroom: Linguistic practices and ritual text acts. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 560–568). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Macfadyen_560-568.pdf

Maistrello, S. (2007). *La parte abitata della Rete*. Milano: Tecnologie Nuove.

Margiotta, U. (2007). *Insegnare nella Società della Conoscenza*. Lecce: Pensa.

McConnell, D. (2008). Examining conceptions of e-learning in an intercultural Sino-UK context. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 720–726). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/abstracts/PDFs/McConnell_720-726.pdf

McConnell, D., Banks, S., & Lally, V. (2007). Developing a collaborative approach to e-learning design in an intercultural (Sino-UK) context. In H. Spencer-Oatey (Ed.), *e-Learning initiatives in China: Pedagogy, policy and culture* (pp. 175–187). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

McLoughlin, C. (2001). Inclusivity and alignment: Principles of pedagogy, task and assessment design for effective cross-cultural online learning. *Distance Education, 22* (1), 7–29.

McLoughlin, C. (2007). Adapting e-learning across cultural boundaries: A framework for quality learning, pedagogy and interaction. In A. Edmundson (Ed.), *Globalized e-learning cultural challenges* (pp. 223–238). London: Information Sciences Publishing.

Mercer, N. (2000). *Words and minds: How we use language to think together*. London: Routledge.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimension of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morse, K. (2003). Does one size fit all? Exploring asynchronous learning in a multicultural environment. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 7* (1), 37–55.

O'Reilly, T. (2005). *What's web 2.0? Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software*. Retrieved December 23, 2010, from http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html

OECD (2009). *Creating effective teaching and learning environments: First results from TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey)*. Paris: OECD. Retrieved December 22, 2010, from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/17/51/43023606.pdf

Paloff, R., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Raffaghelli, J. (2008). *Project Alfa-MIFORCAL: A global e-learning model to develop social and professional teachers' identity*. Poster Presentation at the European Distance E-Learning Network – Research Workshops – Promoting Access and Social Inclusion through E-learning, UNESCO, Paris, France.

Reynolds, M. (2008). Perspectives on the International student experience: A review. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 727–735). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September, 10, 2010, from http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Reynolds_727-735.pdf

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The virtual community, homesteading on the electronic frontier*. Cambridge: MIT.

Rollin, I., & Harrap, A. (2005). Can e-learning foster intercultural competence? *Brookes eJournal of Learning and Teaching*, *1* (3). Retrieved November 11, 2009, from http://bejlt.brookes.ac.uk/vol1/volume1issue3/practice/rollin_harrap.html

Rovai, A. P. (2002). Building sense of community at a distance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3* (1), 1–16. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EJ646664.

Rushkof, D. (2006). *Screen-agers: Lessons in chaos from digital kids*. New York: Hampton Press Communication.

Rutheford, A., & Kerr, B. (2008). An inclusive approach to online learning environments: Models and Resources. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 9* (2). Retrieved May 21, 2009, from http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/tojde30/pdf/article_2.pdf

Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. London: Temple Smith.

Sharples, M., Taylor, J., & Valvoula, G. (2007). A theory of learning for the mobile age. In *The Sage Handbook of e-learning research* (pp. 221–245). London: Sage.

Silver, D. (2000). Looking backwards, looking forward: Cyberculture studies 1990–2000. Retrieved May 15, 2008, from http://rccs.usfca.edu/intro.asp. [Original work published on *Web.studies: Rewiring media studies for the digital age* (pp. 19–30), edited by D. Gauntlett. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000].

Turkle, S. (1996). *Life on the screen* [Italian Ed., 1997, *La vita sullo schermo. Nuove Identità e relazioni sociali nell'epoca di Internet*]. Milano: Apogeo.

Whitehead, J., & McNiff, J. (2006). *Action research: Living theory*. London: Sage.

Zenios, M., & Goodyear, P. (2008). Where is learning in networked learning construction? *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 607–615). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 4, 2010, from http://networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Zenios_607-615.pdf

Zhang, Z., & Huang, R. (2008). Challenges for Chinese learners in Sino-UK intercultural online interactions – Case study of an eChina–UK Project. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning* (pp. 743–748). ISBN 978-1-86220-206-1. Retrieved September 10, 2010, from http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/organisations/netlc/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Zhang_743-748.pdf