

Developing multilingualism in cyberspace: What are the possibilities?

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Being able to function effectively in a multilingual context is one of the dimensions listed in the profile of the Stellenbosch University student. This in essence means that students should have cultural competence, a basic knowledge of some of the high-frequency words and phrases and their functions in other languages, and a well-developed strategic competence. Cultural competence refers to the ability to function effectively in diverse contexts and to interact and respond in culturally appropriate ways. Strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980)– here refers to the ability to initiate and sustain interaction by employing a variety of appropriate strategies when communicating (e.g. asking for clarification, code switching, repetition etc). However, as noted a basic knowledge of culture and other languages is imperative.

Students are often not motivated to learn additional or in some cases foreign languages unless this is for instrumental (finding work) and integrative purposes (integrating into a target culture) (Gardner, 1985). Teaching students a language through a service module –as a graduate outcome -places additional demands on study time. The challenge then is to find appropriate learning spaces for the realization of this particular graduate outcome.

I report in this presentation on an online reading and writing project, The Sharing Cultures Project which I used as part of the curricular activity with a group of PGCE students in the module Multilingual Education 774. The Sharing Cultures Project started as a Fulbright-funded two-year online reading and writing project between students at the then University of Port Elizabeth and Columbia College in Chicago. The purpose was to provide students with an experience in international learning using the internet as a tool. Thus, students would experience each other's readings, cultures, worldviews etc. through their online interaction. The project was very successful in rapidly developing student's literacies. Given that this literacy development took place within a low-anxiety environment (Krashen, 1981) where the focus was on how students construct meaning, created a context to test whether these acquisition-rich conditions would show the same effects if students purposefully sought to learn each others languages.

The 2010 Sharing Cultures Project involved linking the SU students with groups of students from Columbia College in Chicago, and the Volgograd Institute in Russia on a blogsite, www.sharingcultures2010.org. The purpose was not only to use the blog site as a tool where student teachers doing a module on multilingual education could explore as “teachers” the potential of the site for multilingual practice, but also to test

whether they could teach and learn the various languages represented by the students. I share some of the lessons learnt from previous years (Blum-malley and Ruiters, 2008) and how these lessons shaped and influenced the current design of the project, I highlight some of the successes and failures as well as suggesting a way forward for developing the type of multicultural, multilingual competence we suggest as part of our graduate outcomes.

References:

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