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Let's Facebook? The potential of social networks in promoting learner communication and the development of intercultural awareness in an online intercultural exchange

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Abstract

Of all open resources, over the past few years Facebook has become one of the most popular platforms for online social networking and communication, and has therefore attracted the attention of practitioners and researchers in the field of education, who have seen its potential in offering new learning opportunities. Recent studies have focused on the impact of social networking websites on the development of foreign language learners' linguistic and socio-pragmatic competence (Blattner and Fiori 2009, Kabilan et al. 2010) as well as on students' engagement and motivation in using Facebook to support classroom and collaborative work (Roblyer et al. 2010, Haverback 2009, Mills 2009). None of the studies on Facebook, however, has explored the potential of private Facebook groups as part of telecollaborative activities between geographically distant students. The study described in this paper situates itself in the body of research on the use of Facebook in educational settings, and tries to suggest that, if adequately integrated in telecollaboration projects, the social network can have positive effects on students' process of intercultural learning through the promotion of an informal and friendly environment for socialisation.

The paper describes a telecollaboration project using English as a *lingua franca* between students majoring in Foreign Languages at the University of Padova (Italy) and students attending a course in Cultural Studies at the University of Innsbruck (Austria). The project aimed at helping students develop both their language skills and intercultural awareness through critical interaction about cultural issues with partners from a different cultural and language background. Interaction between the students took place by means of weekly Skype sessions, reflective diaries, and written discussion forums set up on a dedicated Facebook Group page. All the online tools used in the exchange, including Facebook, were kept private so as to guarantee the students' privacy. Overall, the telecollaboration project was very successful in that it helped the students to see their own and the other culture under a critical light and fostered communication in the foreign language. Facebook played an important role in enhancing the opportunities for intercultural discussion: not only did the students actively participate in the forums set up on their Group page,

but they also took the initiative by posting reflections, comments and questions for their peers and tutors, as well as sharing further open resources (such as YouTube videos and images from the Web) on the Group wall. Facebook was therefore seen as a safe and friendly meeting place for the students involved in the exchange, where they felt motivated to explore the assigned topics in an informal, yet enriching, way.