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Intercultural learning on the Web
Steps to the "cultures In-between"[1]

abstract

This article presents a process of creation of an informal learning-community within a project of international cooperation among Turkey, Slovenia and Italy, which main goal was to promote teachers professionalism and collaboration across frontiers with impact on intercultural dialogue. The creation, strategies and use of a virtual working/learning space (VWLS) to promote this process are hereby described. Furthermore, in this article I attempt to show how the VWLS can give support to intercultural dialogue, from motivation to participate and share the own cultural identity, to the process of working and learning together. Furthermore, the VWLS becomes *meaningful*, exposing teachers and students to an **enlarged cultural context,** diverse, but also comprehensive of the own original cultural context, because built semantically by themselves. This sense making process could impact on a new dimension of intercultural learning in a new place *without frontiers*, that is represented by "virtual" reality.
Research questions addressing this explorative and qualitative research work where: can the web spaces become place to promote intercultural learning? How those online spaces should be featured in terms of representation of *cultural differences*? How could they promote intercultural dialogue? And the most exciting: how could they allow processes of construction of new culturally hybrid meanings?

Questo articolo presenta un processo di creazione di una comunità di apprendimento informale attraverso un progetto di cooperazione internazionale fra Turchia, Slovenia e Italia, cui scopo principale è stato il promuovere la professionalità di un gruppo di insegnanti coinvolti in un processo di collaborazione internazionale con impatto sul dialogo interculturale. Vengono quindi descritte la creazione, strategie e uso dello spazio virtuale di apprendimento e collaborazione (VWLS) per supportare il suddetto processo. Inoltre, in questo articolo si tenta di mostrare come l'ambiente virtuale di apprendimento può dare supporto al dialogo interculturale, dalla motivazione a partecipare e condividere la propria identità culturale, al processo di collaborazione ed apprendimento congiunto. Inoltre, si tenta di mostrare come il VWLS diventa *significativo*, in quanto espone gli insegnanti e studenti a un **contesto culturale allargato**, diverso, ma anche comprensivo del proprio e originale contesto culturale, poiché creato semanticamente dagli utenti. Questo processo di costruzione di senso potrebbe avere impatto su una nuova dimensione dell'apprendimento interculturale in un nuovo spazio "*senza frontiere*", rappresentato dalla "realtà" virtuale.
Le domande poste inizialmente in questo processo di ricerca esplorativa, di natura qualitativa, sono state: possono gli spazi nel Web diventare un luogo per promuovere l'ap-

1 In this title I'm paraphrasing Homi Bhabba's work "*Culture's In-Between*" in the sense of a meaning making space where culture is continuously recreated as engines of social and historical transformation.

prendimento interculturale? Che forma dovrebbero acquisire gli stessi in termini di rappresentazione della *differenza culturale* ? E l'aspetto più interessante: come potrebbero tali spazi consentire processi di costruzione di nuovo senso, culturalmente ibrido?

Key Words*:* Case Study, Intercultural, Teachers' Training, Virtual Learning Environment, Learning Metaphors

1. Introduction

More than in any other place, multiculturalism has entered in classrooms as a complex phenomenology, challenging schooling systems and teachers' professional identity (Hargreaves, 2003). The many cultural "*software of mind*"[2] with which kids, parents and teachers are reading facts and practices are revealed by the declination of "well founded" beliefs in traditional education: academic success, intelligence, learning performance, didactics, teaching.

The discussion is not new at all[3]; which is rather new, is the dimension of multicultural phenomenon, once focused on rich countries that attracted immigration flows, or ex-colonialist countries; today multiculturalism is present in every city, and almost in every community, being recognized racial and interethnic problems in poor countries as the basis of conflict, which education could help to solve (Leclerq, 2003).

The teachers, as professionals of education, are at the center of this storm: they

2 Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J., (2005) *"Cultures and Organizations, Software of the Mind",* revised and expanded 2nd edition, New York: Mc. Graw Hill.

3 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* (Coulby, 2006:246) . The intercultural approach represents the most appropriate response to the challenges of globalization and complexity (Portera, 2006b). As Portera points out, "...*It offers means to gain a complete and thorough understanding of the concepts of democracy and pluralism, as well as a different customs, traditions, faiths and values. Intercultural education helps to identify the risks of globalization and multicultural communities; of economically motivated rules and regulations, without any intervention by governments and /or politics . Intercultural education approach, taking into account the diversities that are involved and interacting in an educational setting, could allow a more inclusive view of society, respectful of differences, and eager to build new horizons of (inter) culture, without falling into the melting pot identity, but recovering memory and identity...*" (Portera, 2008: 488) . In Coulby's words *If education is not intercultural, it is probably not education, but rather the inculcation of nationalist or religious fundamentalism* (Coulby, 2006:246) Intercultural Pedagogy cannot be understood as one aspect of educational provision. Interculturalism is not a subject which can be given timetable time alongside all the others, nor is it appropriate to ine phase of education only. Interculturalism is a theme, probably the major theme, which needs to inform the teaching and learning of all subject. Furthermore, Intercultural Pedagogy needs to be introduced as a methodological approach in order to revolution ethnocentric curriculum (Banks, op.cit; Favaro, 2004, Minello, 2008).

cannot remain out of these trends, since they are teaching for the knowledge society (Grant, C.A. & Wieczorek, K. , 2000, Hargreaves, 2003) Teachers' efforts to address intercultural education and dialogue occur in this scenery of educational change, where internationalization in education systems —aimed to achieve international identities and global competitiveness— is to be contrasted with the necessity of facing the problem of migrations at the local level (Gundara, 2000; Banks, 2001; Ziglio, 2004), as is the case of European Union, one of the most developed projects of recognition of a transnational/regional cultural identity in the respect of local cultural traits.

Teachers can no longer work from an ethnocentric vision of teaching (Lynch, 1992; Leclerq, 2003): they need to become professionals able to recognize ***new multicultural learning contexts***, respecting ***diverse learning styles*** (Margiotta, 1999; Gobbo, 2000, 2004), which are completely changing relationships with classroom, peers, institutions and community; also challenging the basis of conventional teacher status and function (Margiotta, *ibid*).

The problem of a multicultural society, is completely renewed, not only because of migrations or ethnic conflicts, but also because of the accent put on discovering and promoting cultural identities based on neohumanistic values; hence, a new vision of humankind , in a planet that appears to be smaller and smaller: a planetary identity, in E. Morin's words (Morin, 2003).

The above mentioned multicultural dynamics are not the only problem teachers have to afford. It seems there's a third dimension of multiculturalism, a dimension that could appear as "a third culture"[4]: in the context of continuous internationalization processes of media and communications, teachers are challenged by *ubiquitous learning:* informal learning that occur while using Internet and mobile devices. It seems that schools as places of socialization, have to integrate digital networks and virtual worlds that function as socialization substitutes. Particularly Internet is becoming one of the most important *places* where learning occur, no matter what education policies preview or experts, headmasters, teachers and trainers actually do (Carneiro, 2007). Is Internet becoming a place for a new culture, where new identities could be forged, beyond the local cultural identities? This question leads to the problem of the Web as a space reflective of cultures, that could *deterritorialise* us while at the same time keep in touch with past homes and thereby creating a kind of transnational identity… Are the virtual environments on the net capable of promoting skills to interact leaving behind the inflexible aspects of the own culture in front of other's culture? And this question takes

4 The question of *thirdness* in culture – as a semiotic process of creation and appropriation of meaning- is a very complex one. Founding on semiotic and linguistic studies – R. Barthes, Ch. Peirce, M. Bakhtin, C. Kramsch (1996) highlights *thirdness* as a process emerging from dialogic relation between linguistic and visual signs and symbolic creation, where there's the *differential* (or third position) created by motivations and emotions put by the speaker into the act of communicate. Going further, she emphasizes the importance of H. Bhabha's perspective, a post-structuralist thinker that complements the Peirce's and Bakhtin's idea of *thirdness,* when considering that culture *is located* on discursive practices, and on the necessity of give a focus of interpretation to discourse. This is in fact the third space, one's built by the subject of enunciation. When considering the Internet as a Third culture we could take into account these foundations, being the net a "metaphorical" space, composed by text and images which acquire the quality of signs more evidently than "reality". Communications are "frozen", kept on social webpages as a memory of dialogic processes, a visible architecture of human negotiation of new cultural senses.

me to reflect about the Web as a phenomenon spreading over a vast number of countries, where a continuous interaction of people coming from a physical geography could create a new virtual geography, with new cultures and new identities…If so happens: What could be the role of teachers in leading the creation of new places to learn on the net? So far: How to train teachers to be those needed leaders?

1.1. *Meeting equal-but-diverse people on the Web*

The social shifting produced by ICTs fast development claims for openness to an interdisciplinary vision of research and teaching in the several curriculum areas (Banks, 2001; Margiotta, 2007). Furthermore, it is necessary to consider that teachers have to face the *screenagers* generation (Rushkoff, 2006): the students are exposed to an amazing quantity of stimulation coming from the net, hence participating in several *virtual environments* and *communities,* sharing new cultural values and patterns of behaviour; if in some cases these patterns have been declared as foreign, extraneous to the participant, the main cyberculture studies emphasize that a new culture of cybernauts is emerging (Rheingold, 1993; Smith, M. & P. Kollock 1999); producing "multi-identities" where the real life is only one of the possible sceneries where the self is forged (Turkle, 1996); in Maistrello's[5] beautiful metaphor, these young people are citizens from new territories on the net.

Indeed, in cyberculture studies, this problem has been addressed in terms of virtual communities and online identities - online interactions, digital discourses, access and denial to the Internet, and interface design of cyberspace –; according to cyber-anthropologists' definitions, cyberspace becomes a social space in which people still meet "face-to-face", even when new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face' are needed. In David Silver 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*[6].

These words are strongly indicating the way virtual communities could infiltrate our "real" world (Turkle,1996). It seems that these communities are giving the possibility to the users of creating meaning, having a feeling of belonging and thus, having elements to built on their own identities and personal beliefs, no matter the place they come from: the meeting point on the net, the virtual space, is a new place, where stimulating conversations or interactions occur.

One of the most important communities studied by several anthropologist and sociologist of cyberculture has been "The Well" (http://www.well.com/)) —a computer conferencing system that enables people around the world to carry on public conversations and exchange private e-mail (Rheingold, 1993). Quoting Rheingold to describe The Well, "*Millions of people on every continent also participate in the computer-mediated social groups known as virtual communities, and this population is growing fast. Finding the WELL was like discovering a cozy little world*

5 Maistrello, S. 2007, "*La parte abitata della Rete*", Milan: Tecnologie Nuove.

6 David Silver, 2000, "Looking Backwards, Looking Forward: Cyberculture Studies 1990-2000, retrieved from http://rccs.usfca.edu/intro.asp, 15 May 2008; originally published on *Web.studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age,* edited by David Gauntlett (Oxford University Press, 2000): 19-30.

that had been flourishing without me, hidden within the walls of my house; an entire cast of characters welcomed me to the troupe with great merriment as soon as I found the secret door. Like others who fell into the WELL, I soon discovered that I was audience, performer, and scriptwriter, along with my companions, in an ongoing improvisation. A full-scale subculture was growing on the other side of my telephone jack, and they invited me to help create something new"[7].

Contemporarily to Rheingold's research, the idea of communities populating the net, with several scopes, became largely studied and accepted. In line with this trend, studies about online learning communities such as Palloff & Pratt, 1999, suggest that the social phenomenon of community could support online learning processes; a suggestion that is strengthen by theories of learning that highlight the role of social interaction in the construction of knowledge from early theories of Dewey, 1929 and Vygotsky, [1932]1990, to the important work of Resnick , Levin, Teasley 1991) Further support may be found in the proposal that knowledge is constructed within the social milieu (Cunningham, 1996).

It is worth to consider Garrison and Anderson's (2000; 2003) interpretation of the term "community of enquiry", based upon the first philosopher Charles S. Pierce' idea (1839-1914). According to these authors, e-learning adopters are more inclined to work collaboratively, following interactions in online spaces, and reflecting on them to promote self-guided learning, in an effort to replicate the results of face-to-face experience. This, in time, leads to rethinking discursive space: according to Garrison and Anderson (2000, 2003), the successful use of asynchronous text-based communication media that can facilitate higher learning requires: a) Social presence, as non-subject based communication, expressions of personal experience, expressions of acknowledgements of other participants, etc; b) Cognitive presence –evidence of academic engagement with the texts, "thinking out loud" evidence of reflection, critical thinking and further construction of meaning; c) Teaching presence –design (of the programme), facilitation of the asynchronous discussions and direct instruction.

Supported by connexionist approach, the metaphor of social networks to promote knowledge sharing and building, legitimation of peripheral participation, and distributed intelligence (Resnick, L.B, 1991; Wenger, E. 1998) were concepts that relied on the assumption that most knowledge is an interpretation of experience, an interpretation based on human exchanges (mostly conversations that have an important idiosyncratic component), that both enable and constrain individuals' processes of sense-making.

Indeed, Sherry Turkle's research about identity's construction processes through MUDs (Multi-users Domains) take us to reflect on the idea of virtual reality as metaphoric spaces where people navigates, interact, and communicate about their chosen characters, which in turn reflects a part of their identities[8].

It is worth to remember, at this point, the classic concept of *Agorà*: The Greek word "*agora*" comes from the verb "*ageirein* meaning "to gather" and designated

7 Reinghold, H. (1993) "The Virtual Community" – Electronic Version http://www.rheingold.com-/vc/book/intro.html , retrieved on 28 July 2008 – Introduction.

8 Sh. Turkle uses the example of "Dungeons and Dragons", one of the first multi-players game where people from all over the world interacted to *hack and slay,* but also to create common or individual rooms, castles, cities. Once created, people comunicate to populate them, as a social adventure.

initially the assembly of the whole people, as opposed to the council of chiefs (*boulè*). From there, it came to designate the location of that assembly and what happened on this location, hence its later meaning of "market-place". The Agora became in the Greek society an important place that represented mainly democracy, but also, it offered the possibility of communicate, learn, and exchange not only goods but mainly ideas. In fact, in Aristotle's ideal city, the Agora represents the life of it, being separated into two domains: the vulgar, one for business and commerce, and the "*free agora*" for more serious political, intellectual and religious activities (*Politics, 13331a31)*: from this vision, it seems clear that the Agora is what people, through intense participation, build, rather than a simple localized, architectonic, place.

The evidence gathered above, leads us to the idea that meeting people from several cultural backgrounds and experiences on the net should be possible, through new contextualization of interaction in a "symbolic place", other than the own places of belonging. In this process of negotiation: *are cultures discovered or cancelled*?. This kind of question seems to be unexplored by the above mentioned studies: the "intercultural question" have been introduced as a background, being assumed that all people participating on the net accepts a certain shared (cyber)culture . Only in the last years, where the intercultural discussion is emerging as a new model to rethink education relationships (in the school, between educators/teachers and students), the idea that intercultural encounters can have place also in the net is being highlighted (Dunn & Marinetti, 2002; McLoughlin, 2007; Liu, 2007; Rutheford & Kerr, 2008; Bélisle , 2008), attempting hence to develop "culturally sensitive" e-learning environments.

This is the idea that I'll try to work out in this article, being the related assumption that the possibility of creating places –like an Agora- on the net, can become later on, a space of sense-making where not only learning, but also intercultural dialogue and reflection would occur.

2. The PERMIT case study

2.1. *Method*

The experience discussed in this article was part of an international cooperation project called PERMIT. I played a role as participant research, taking part on the process of developing e-learning strategies and designing online platform that allowed teachers from several nationalities to interact in carrying out project's activities.

Therefore, the method used to gather and analyze data in order to build the case, was a Mixed Methods approach (Cresswell, 2004; Creswell & Garrett, 2008), focused on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study, founding on the philosophy that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone, facilitating a process of understanding and building significant data. The leading concept underlying to such a pragmatic philosophy is that we are not engaged in a mere research process, but rather in supporting -and we should say ethically engaged on (Whitehead & Mc Niff, 2006) a process of generating new practices to change/improve the life of participant social groups The key elements of the above mentioned approach were:

- **Participant researcher to the instructional design and training process**, taking part on the process developing e-learning strategies and design of the international online platform where teachers and students interacted
- **Follow-up of an online community of 24 teachers for six month**, participating in three international residential workshops (three days each) and sharing the Virtual Working/Learning Space every day[9].
- **Questionnaires** (to the whole group) **and interviews** (to a part of the group) were done in the meanwhile of learning process
- **Participation to Italian Monitoring** – focus group with students –
- **Participation at Students VWLS –** teachers' implementation of a VWLS for their own students –

Funding on such a mixed-methods approach, first part of case's data, relating to the contextualization of intervention and justification of strategies adopted to introduce a virtual learning space, was featured on the base of questionnaires' results, through very simple descriptive statistics. A second part of case's 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 where applied to transcriptions of interviews, focus group, questionnaires' open written questions and on excerpts of online forum, in order to achieve a conceptual map of processes of meaning emerging from the learning community. The codification obtained guided in time to further conceptualization and confrontation with the initial project goals, and suppositions made by the group about research leading questions: *What actually happens when people of several cultures participate in virtual learning spaces? Is it possible to influence learners' cultural identity and sense of belonging, opening possibilities to intercultural dialogue ? These first general questions would produce, later, more specific questions about the case's focus: Is it possible to influence teachers' practices towards an intercultural perspective of teaching through the net?*

2.2. *Case Contextualization*

It's worth to present the project to understand the experience's context, where the concept of "*working across frontiers*" became so important[10].

PERMIT aims to promote the Civil Society Dialogue between the European Union and Turkey with specific focus on ensuring a better knowledge and understanding of Turkey within the European Union; from the beginning, this goal was transformed by the Scientific Committee into the more significant and represen-

9 The VLE consisted in three areas (International Teachers Community; National –Italian, Turkish, Slovenian- Teachers' Community; Students' Community –in time splitted by subjects, with an interdisciplinary approach, "Languages Community –LC-", "Humanities Community –HC-", "Sciences Community –SC-". Inside these communities, the following activities where analyzed: Italian Teachers' Community, 9 online forum and one activity of geolocalization; International Teachers' Community: 7 online forum; Students' Community: 8 online forum –HC-; 7 online forum -LC-; 3 online forum –SC-. Analysis of online discourse and structure of online learning spaces was done considering semantic categories (codes) emerged from those materials, which is the most superficial level of qualitative analysis.

10 In the following quotations, all references to the participant institutions, apart from the researcher's institution, have been removed.

tative of a process of mutual learning from practices, reflecting upon partners' cultural identities Hence, a working hypothesis was designed as follows: *Intercultural awareness among researchers, teachers and students involved in the project (sample 10, 100, 800) is supposed to be low. The innovations in teaching methodologies and materials is expected to enhance researchers, teachers and students' awareness of cultural diversity and understanding*.

The project intervention should then enable teachers, (with the support of a wider teacher community set up by a first research group), to develop their own teaching material on crucial themes such as sustainable development, languages and multilingualism as part of cultural identity, critical thinking and ethical behaviour, thus favouring deeper understanding of Turkish, Slovenian and Italian realities.

Funding on a previous project (PACE[11]) within this big "container" the idea was to promote teachers' professional development as a mean to help the introduction of an intercultural perspective of education (teaching practices) in participating countries; bearing in mind that the international dialogue developed within the project could have an impact in raising cultural awareness and understanding among teachers and students, who were considered the main players, in the assumption of the project, of educational systems: from good practices in schools, *hubs of excellence* about intercultural dialogue could be created, and hence, institutional building and social impact could have place. Therefore, the Scientific Committee, opened from the very beginning of the project, a discussion about dimensions of incidence on the acquisition of an intercultural competence:

- *The new methodology and the innovative teaching materials is expected to enhance students' awareness of cultural diversity and understanding.*
- *After piloting the innovative teaching materials the teachers can register heightened students' knowledge, understandings, cognitions; they are better informed on cultural variety, they can understand various believes and values and accept otherness, they accept differences among cultures, they can decenter, view their own attitudes towards intercultural reality.*
- *The projects activities and research findings contribute to build bridges among nations and minorities (in Italy, Turkey, and Slovenia) and promote awareness of the intercultural reality*[12].

The research group built upon these assumptions in order to create the main tools used to explore the several realities, aiming to achieve a comparative picture and hence help teachers to generate their own teaching materials, which in time should be significant to change, hopefully, that picture.

11 PACE: Project Agency Cooperation Education – United World College of the Adriatic Sea. www.educooperation.eu

12 Rational: First Scientific Committee – Synthesis of the SC discussion prepared by Prof. Lucija ok, University of Primorska – 25 November 2008

3. Teachers and Students' Use and Opinions about Internet as space to promote intercultural learning

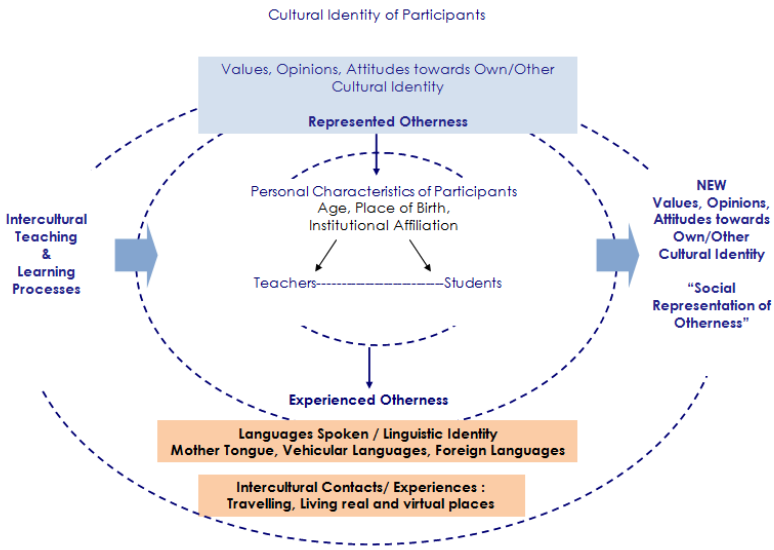
The project's starting point was a study to understand cultural values influencing teaching and learning practices of institutional realities involved on PERMIT project.

This exploratory study consisted on the administration of questionnaires to all teachers and students involved on PERMIT process (from teachers' training to experimentation of learning units).

The conceptual matrix that guided questionnaires' development and data analysis was rather complex, in it attempt to comprehend the most important dimensions of cultural identities.

Dimensions as demographic information, linguistic identity, contact with other cultures, intercultural learning and teaching, and values, beliefs, and opinions about intercultural dialogue where the base to map the reality where PERMIT project expected to intervene.

These dimensions in time were divided in categories that raised the question of otherness as *Experienced Otherness, Representation of Otherness in Society - before entering the schooling system-,Representation of Otherness within the schooling system*. As it was hypothesized by SC, the scheme shows also that a new emerging representation of otherness would appear after participating in significant experiences of learning at school (the area of PERMIT intervention)



Scheme 1. The Conceptual Matrix of the Study
Research Report: "An exploratory Study on Cultural Values Influencing Schooling System"
PERMIT Research Group

From these complex picture I wish to take an excerpt to support the importance of Internet as *place to experience otherness,* as it emerged from the opinion of teachers and students. This excerpt of data shows only the Italian case[13], were I was directly involved; **17 teachers and 208 students,** coming from 4 Schools (3 Vocational Training –Tourism and Design-; 1 Academic –Arts-), from North East Italy[14] (Veneto and Trentino Alto Adige), were respondents to the questionnaire regarding the present study. The group showed predominant presence of females, both among Students and Teachers; within the first group, only 31% of respondents were male; within the second, only 23,5% were male. Nevertheless, this is representative of the current situation on schools such as those participating to PERMIT project –males seem to be concentrated on courses of technology and crafts, that aren't traditionally interested to general, human topics such as intercultural dialogue; this is of course an area to be afforded by future intervention, considering it a general, transversal curricular area-. We can also say that teachers involved are representative of mean characteristics of Italian teaching boards in Veneto Region: they are mainly middle aged (with 84,7% of teachers over 40 years old), and women (71,4%). Consistently, they have rather long experience on teaching (mode 16-20 years).

Administration of questionnaires was done directly by the same teachers-experimenters, involved into the study. They had been previously trained in order to administrate questionnaires, via online forms, and worked together with English language colleagues in IT labs, so the whole administration was accomplished in one session per class.

13 The following statistics have been elaborated under the direction of Roberto Melchiori and with technical support on online questionnaires management and SPSS implementation of the Center Interfaculty for Educational Research and Advanced Training and UNIVIRTUAL

14 The Northeastern Italy is represented by a group of regions that have a more or less common lines of historical and socio-economic development. Being rural areas strong emigration occurred after the 2nd WW, when industrialization (mainly manufactures) started as a consistent process, linked to the whole process of recovery of European economies. Several factors such as social capital –networks of social collaboration- put the bases for a successful development model (local, diffuse development, based on SMEs –Small and Medium Enterprises-). As a consequence, fluxes of immigration started to enter consistently from the 80's, both for the workforce shortages in the region, and for the opportunities of a good quality of life. Christian morality diffused among people of this region, generated a position of tolerance to diversity, and in some extent paths of integration to local realities –rather monocultural and surprised by the presence of immigrants, differently from countries that had a history as colonizers-. In the last years, a general sense of crisis of the above mentioned model, the post-modern perception of threat of security, and the constant increase of immigrants from very diverse cultures such Muslims (Balkans, North Africa, Middle-East) and China, have generated groups that segregate foreigners and have an approach of intolerance, fear and avoidance of cultural differences, emphasizing traditions, despite the inconsistencies generated by a young generation grown-up in capitalist wellness. Italian students participating to this study are part, doubtless, of this reality, since they come from middle-worker-class (mainly vocational schools). Teachers are to be taken separately from this reality, since they have an "intellectual" tradition that place them critically with regard of cultural traditions of the region. In fact, many of them come from other regions of Italy (namely, the South), in search of occupation within the prosperous North.

3.1. *Students' Experienced Otherness on the Net*

About contacts on the net, we hypothesized that there's an incoming trend of "*Screenagers*" that are able of use the net to generate new (international) relations that in time can become intercultural interactions. Data doesn't completely confirm this idea, since we have only a third part of young Italian people participating to this study having contacts with peers from other nationalities on the net (30,8% against a 63% of students that didn't have any contact). The characterization of the experience as mainly positive (46,2% quite positive, 25,8% completely positive) points out a very good field to cultivate experiences of intercultural relations on the net.

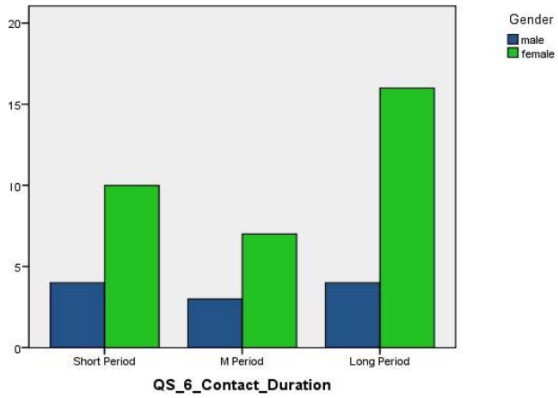
Peers Contacts Internet					
		Frequencies	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid	Yes	64	30,8	32,8	32,8
	No	131	63,0	67,2	100,0
	Total	195	93,8	100,0	-
Missing		13	6,3	-	-
	Total	208	100,0	-	-

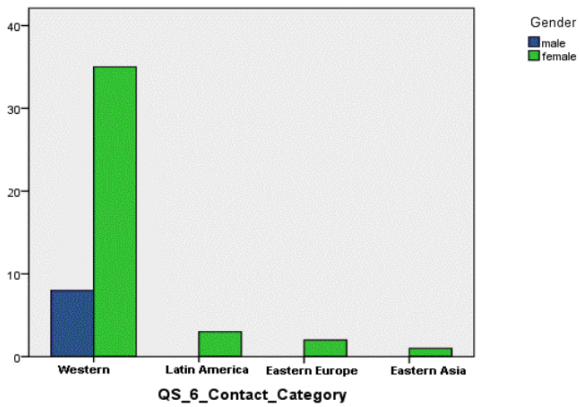
Table 1 – Contact with Peers from other Nationalities on Internet

Graphic 1 – Students Duration of Contacts with people of other cultures on Internet in relation with Gender

References:

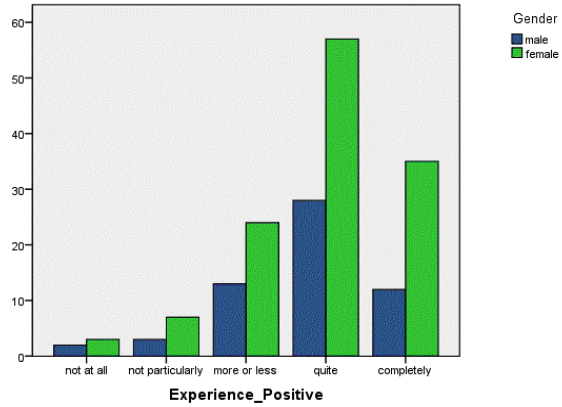
SHORT PERIOD: 1-2 weeks
MEDIUM PERIOD: 3-4 weeks
LONG PERIOD: more than one month





Graphic 2 – Students Contacts on Internet with people of other cultures by Geographical Area and Gender

Graphic 3 – Students Contacts with people from other cultures on Internet Satisfaction with the experience



From the results hereby presented, it can be stated that Italian students are very well motivated and eager to know and understand other cultures, by collaborating with foreign students through the use of ICT's (always as part of real exchanges with other students, a result that is not presented here). Nevertheless, it is also to be considered that participants, coming from a "Western" culture (Western Europe, industrialized society), tend to interact mainly with students of other Western countries (Graphic 2), reducing the levels of exposition to diversity (and its distressful aspects). It also can be addressed as curiosity for other "dominant" cultural patterns, rather than a real sensibility to diversity. We can be more optimistic with regard to the amount of time spent on intercultural contacts through the net: students are likely to invest generally more than one month (long period) to nurture an intercultural relationship. This assumptions entail of course further research.

3.2. *Students' Opinions: Can Intercultural Learning occur through the use of ICT's?*

A section of students' questionnaire attempted to raise opinion about the kind of teaching methods and topics that should be implemented within school in order to improve intercultural education

To the main question posed about teaching methods "*What kind of activities should be implemented by teachers to learn intercultural?*" students answered with a strong prevalence of the idea of "keeping in contact" with other peers abroad, both by exchanges and by the use of ICT's.

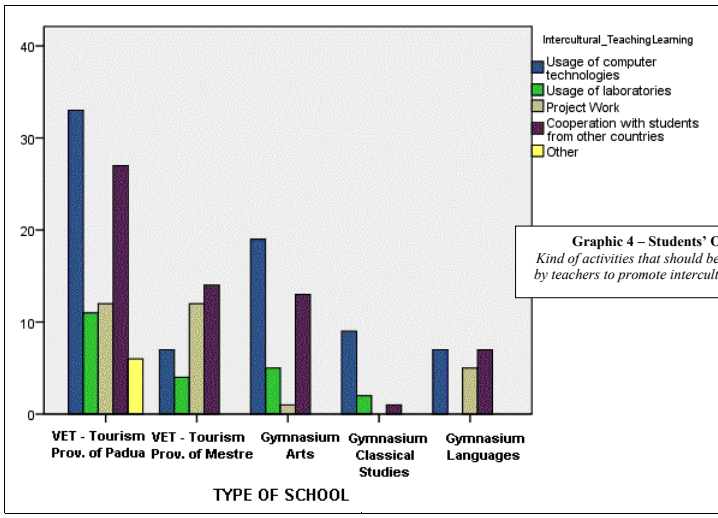
This last element gained a central attention among students: it seems to confirm, in simple terms, what has been stated by background on new learners profile (the *Digital Natives*, Prensky, 2001), mainly centered on the interest about communications through the use of media.

As Prensky puts: *Our students have changed radically (…) They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV). Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives.* (Prensky, 2001: 1)

As we mentioned at introduction, the Internet could become a place to socialize with other cultures. But the problem here is also, as we put further in our argumentation, that the net could reinforce a "transnational" culture, that leaves behind the richness of local belongings. The abuse in considering Internet as place to promote intercultural relationships could produce, also, neglecting the problem of internationalization at home, which is to say, understanding the problem of immigration with which students experience everyday.

Contingency table School * Intercultural_Teaching Learning											
		Methods Adopted									
		Usage of computer technologies		Usage of laboratories		Project Work		Cooperation with students from other countries		Total x School	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
School	VET – Tourism / Province of Padua	33	*39*	11	*13*	12	*14*	27	*32*	85	*45*
	VET – Tourism / Province of Venice	7	*19*	4	*11*	12	*32*	14	*38*	37	*19,5*
	Gymnasium - Arts	19	*50*	5	*13*	1	*2*	13	*34*	38	*20*
	Gymnasium – Classical	9	*75*	2	*16*	0	*0*	1	*8*	12	*6,5*
	Gymnasium - Languages	7	*37*	0	*0*	5	*26*	7	*37*	19	*10*
	Total x Method	75	***39,7***	22	***11,6***	30	***15,9***	62	***32,8***	189	***100***

Table 2 – Opinion of Use of Teaching Methods that promote Intercultural Learning

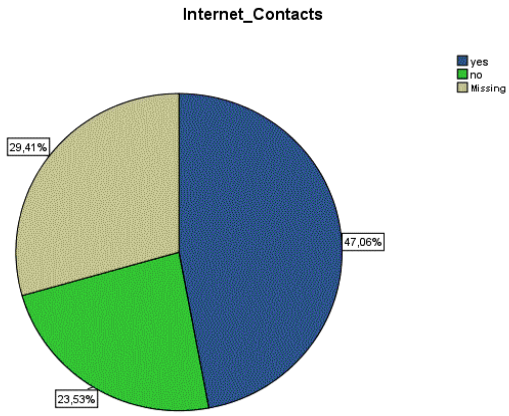


Graphic 4 – Students' Opinion
Kind of activities that should be implemented by teachers to promote intercultural learning

3.3. *Teachers' Experienced Otherness on the Net*

The small but significant group of respondent teachers showed at least curiosity and some very controlled level of exposition to other cultures. In fact, following the study those contacts have always place into the frame of family and friendship in other countries, within social networks of confidence. In some cases, teachers declared to have experienced contacts through the job, or within the controlled context of tourism.

Nevertheless, contacts on the net appeared to be significant: we could assert that a good part of teachers involved in this study was engaged in using technologies of social Web; in fact, as showed in Graphic 5, in a 47% of cases there were or there had been contact with colleagues of other countries with the use of Internet.



Graphic 5 – Teachers' Contacts on Internet with people of other cultures (mainly with colleagues)

Contact with people from other countries via the Internet – Qualitative Analysis

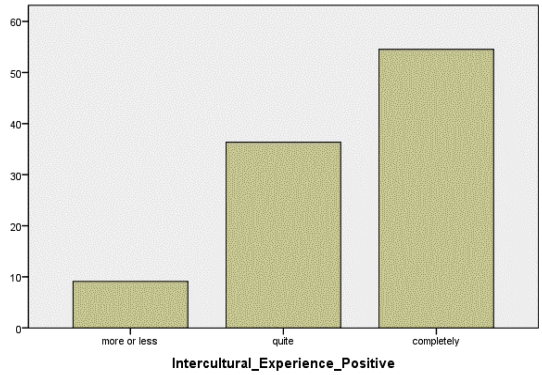
"I have sometimes e contacts with the English teacher of a Dutch school. I met her during a students exchange"
"With my cousin in Russia, it is a recent way of communicate"
"I was mixing with teacher for 2 weeks."
"regarding history of mathematics for a couple of years"
"SEVERAL NATIONALITIES FOR YEARLY PROJECT WORK"
"FRIENDS , MY GIRL FRIEND FOR A LONG TIME"
"Teachers for school personal school projects, e-twinning or Comenius projects"

These statements entail two factors: a) that in 42% of cases (hence, a consistent group) teachers use the net to communicate to other people coming from different cultural reality, in order to maintain professional and personal relationships; b) that technologies are being adopted to give continuity to projects of collaboration across frontiers in order to introduce innovation into the classrooms.

Graphic 6 shows the teachers' level of satisfaction with these experiences of contact: they generally indicated to be quite ore completely satisfied with regard to intercultural contacts, both FTF (face to face) or through the Internet. In the study, it emerged that teachers mainly contact people from closer, "Western" cultures; but teachers' motivation and curiosity is also oriented to explore distant cultures[15].

15 Given the reduced number of quantitative data this dimension was explored through open questions, and emerged, at questions 12 to 15 of Teachers' questionnaires.

Graphic 6 – Teachers' Contacts on Internet Level of Satisfaction



3.4. Teachers' Opinions: Introducing New technologies within teaching practices to address intercultural issues

As showed at "Conceptual Matrix", a questionnaire's section was devoted to study teaching methods generally chosen by respondents, and thus, to deliver curriculum. Building on the bases that the act of teaching is mainly an act of communicating "culture" (in the complete sense of communication, not only verbal) –Margiotta, 1999-, it can be assumed that the teacher delivers curriculum through the use of activities and tools that can be more or less participative, allowing hence different levels of expression of students' selves: the extreme case here is forcing the student to recall and repeat concepts, pertaining to a curriculum vision that could be defined as ethnocentric (there's *one Culture* to be learned: that delivered at school); the intercultural case promotes the act of teaching as a "*conversation*"[16] with diversity, where students feel integrated by recognizing the own and other cultures present on the educational set.

Within Permit experimentation, we have considered hence that more participative teaching methods could address the introduction of intercultural reflection, leading to set learning situations were "a complex intercultural identity" could be developed. Therefore, the point wasn't introduce "intercultural topics" within a flexible curriculum, but mainly implement pedagogical practices that generate an atmosphere of participation, inclusion, equality, among teachers and students. The main assumption here, that we recall, is that traditional methods like lecture and use of textbooks are closer to an ethnocentric approach, where it prevails the teacher discourse that brings into classroom an "official", centralized discourse. Instead of that, methods allowing participation (group work, discussions) students' activity (laboratories, fieldwork, project work), and interaction within enlarged contexts of learning (use of technologies) would allow an ethnorelative focus of topics treated in class, helping students – and also teachers – to develop an

16 There's a strong development of an educational research that consider the important of acts of communication in class: Conversational Analysis. From this, I'm taking the conception of "creating context" through negotiation of meanings that occur between teacher and students, as conversation, in successful teaching. This process has been called "*interthinking*" as a process of creation of an "*intermental development zone*" (Mercer, 2000:141).

intercultural identity (Bélisle, op.cit). It can be argued, on the contrary, that those methods can be superficial and ideologically driven towards the direction the teacher wants to impose (Bélisle, op.cit). The best formula is, doubtless, the use of a variety of teaching methods that guides students from knowledge to understanding, from understanding to putting into practice, transferring to real life; at last, the student should be able of build new –own – sense of knowledge achieved at school within his/her own life.

According to these assumptions, "Teaching Methods Implemented in Class" was a questionnaire's area aimed to explore current practices in class.

As we can see, teachers in this group use a variety of methods, but lecture prevails (64,7% of teachers use rather often and often this method). The other methods are used mainly "sometimes" (35,3% of cases for group work, project work, lab activities, pair works); group work shows more dispersion, with a consistent part of teachers that use it "rarely" (23,5%); but another group uses it "rather often" (23,5%). Almost the same situation applies to the case of project work. Furthermore, with regard to lab activities, the situation seems to be defined by a scarce opportunity of using laboratories, since teachers point out this practice to occur "rarely" (29,4%) and "sometimes" (35,3%); this situation can be given because of the obstacles (logistic, bureaucratic) linked to taking the class outside the classroom/school.

Generally, the situation seems to show a trend of change with regard to teaching methods, towards more open, participatory approach; this trend is surely to be linked to well motivated teachers, that could act isolated, within a yet very traditional system, which couldn't be interested in this "new" activities; furthermore, the context could also offer resistance and reluctance to innovation.

	never	rarely	Some times	Rather often	Always
a) lectures	5,9	0	11,8	35,3	29,4
b) group work	0	23,5	35,3	23,5	0
c) project work	5,9	17,6	35,3	23,5	05,9
d) lab activities	5,9	29,4	35,3	11,8	0
e) pair work	11,8	11,8	35,7	23,5	5,9
f) self-guided work	0	23,5	5,9	35,3	5,9

Table 3 – Type and frequency of Adopted Teaching Methods

Next questionnaire's area studied the level of introduction of ICT's within teaching practices, funding on the assumption discussed on our research framework, that "*Screenagers*" are conforming a third culture through the use of Internet, and therefore, this way of opening a vision of new/other cultures could be effectively implemented in education to support new learning styles (Prensky, op.cit) In line with this, it's important to remember that respondent students considered ICTs crucial to reach other cultures, as a direct way to communicate and collaborate with young people of other parts of the world. Furthermore, there's consistent data showing that online learning approaches promotes better interaction and collective participation (Pallof & Pratt, op.cit)

The results here show a situation of increasing use of ICT's, though still not consistent. The fact that a third part of teachers (35,3) uses "rather often" technologies, is encouraging, with regard to the perspective of regular implementation.

Unfortunately, the next step, which is the use of "blended" approaches were distance learning is integrated to teaching, are not so positive, with a 47,1% that uses this approach "never" and "rarely".

Contacting students by email was only introduced as a very outdated modality to reach the student in online spaces; since there are several platforms that allow asynchronous communication among teacher and students, the use of mail is unnecessary. The data here show that teachers don't use this method consistently.

	never	rarely	Some times	Rather often	Always
a) lectures	5,9	0	11,8	35,3	29,4
b) group work	0	23,5	35,3	23,5	0
c) project work	5,9	17,6	35,3	23,5	05,9
d) lab activities	5,9	29,4	35,3	11,8	0
e) pair work	11,8	11,8	35,7	23,5	5,9
f) self-guided work	0	23,5	5,9	35,3	5,9

Table 4 –Frequency of Use of ICT's in lessons

3.5. Confronting Teachers and Students' Opinions: is it possible to promote intercultural learning through the Net?

Once we introduced separately Students' and Teachers' data, it's worth to draw some conclusions reading across categories.

Coherently with literature, the students of this group[17] are well disposed to learn through collaboration on the Net, with peers of different cultures: this appears to be an imagined dimension of interaction, a wish of contacting with a rather fantastic (literally virtual!) otherness. This can be asserted when confronting this data with real "experienced otherness on the net" which is rather low (only a third part of students, as we recall).

From the other side, teachers seem also to be positively oriented to develop intercultural relationships (both professional and personal) through the net, been actively participating in social web networks, still more intensively than their students. Even if it must be taken into account that respondent teachers where very actively engaged in innovative practices and volunteered to complete questionnaires, this result constitutes a significant trend about teachers' professional interests. The bases to develop new practices funding on technologies to introduce an intercultural dimension to teaching and learning seems to be set, in pragmatic terms (experiences and opinion of respondents).

Why given that motivation in students and teachers, interaction with people from different cultures using the Internet is a rather unusual practice? As we observed through teachers' answers to "teaching methods implemented", traditional methods appear to be most usual practices, questioning the possibility of introducing an intercultural vision on pedagogic approaches.

Here is where institutional scenarios play their part, still preventing the introduction of innovations in teaching methods, where technologies have a central role. Technologies need careful implementation, from teachers' skills to govern

17 We need to remember that these assumptions are based on a small group of respondents from a very particular reality of north-east Italy.

the use of them with pedagogic purposes, to the problem of security of students' identities, the exposition to inadequate contents, and the problem of plagiarism and "netiquette". Furthermore, communications through the use of technologies require an "extra" element, which is, another teacher and class opening a "window" of collaboration, for the same –or at least close- learning goals, and at the same period of school year.

Hence, several variables are playing a role at the time of introducing the net as a place to dialogue across frontiers: ethical, methodological, operational and logistic ones.

If the Web is creating new opportunities to interact, it is also posing several problems to the organization of knowledge, intellectual ownership criteria, time of work (at home and at school), and conventions and codes of practices. Teachers and Studenst enthusiasm seems to be in line with the current representation of the largely commented phenomenon of Web 2.0 (O' Reilly, 2005), which has led to see Internet as platform, where people comes not only to retrieve useful information, but mainly, to collaborate and interact. Technology hence can support social participation on the net, and is no longer to be seen as an "*experts' field*", but as common user opportunity to communicate, create, share, and hence becoming authors. This in time, would encompass a new idea of democracy of information and media (Tapscott, 2007).

But from a critical vision (Cobo Romanì & Kuklinski, 2004), the Web 2.0 could just represent an utopia where the lack of technical skills, the problem of information literacy and critical thinking skills previously acquired to consider the quality of information retrieved, followed by lack of "netiquette" on communications with other users that we cannot see personally, could become crucial obstacles to adopt realistically, and in a fruitful perspective, the Net as an inclusive place, aimed to promote intercultural dialogue.

4. PERMIT Online Learning Space: A strategy within an innovative intercultural teachers' training model

As assumed before, an important point raised by the project was the necessity of working out a successful teachers' training on intercultural education, on the basis of new conceptions of continuing teachers' training. The idea was expressed since the first discussions about training methodology, as ***interwoving formal learning (seminars and e-learning) to teachers expertise, practical knowledge (non-formal learning) as a process of reflection on practice being recognized at academic level.***

This **process** was established according to the following steps[18]:

- Expert teachers as core of a growing learning community
- New incoming teachers sharing good practices across frontiers
- Piloting created materials and involving students as critical participants in a "joint venture".

18 PERMIT training approach, discussed at Second Scientific Committee, Venice, 23-24 January 2009. Synthesis and presentation elaborated by J.Raffaghelli, on the basis of PACE APPROACH (Education Director Working Documents, First Residential Workshops).

- Working through face-to-face (real encounters among teachers) followed by online communications and learning among teachers and students
- Reseachers accompanying the whole process of creation, helping teachers' reflection on practices (From Practical Knowledge to reflection on practice and narrative with impact on professional identity; instruments as portfolio and diary became crucial to account the process of thinking, sharing, experimenting and finally reflecting on results of the "PERMIT learning unit".
- Participatory Evaluation process (triangulation) , with researchers, teachers of the international community and students.
- Recognition of the learning process as academic certification

Training Contents and specific activities of Italian group where hence established, according to the themes that Scientific Committee and research group considered crucial to develop teachers' professionalism on intercultural dialogue.

The process of exemplar material building and experimentation was the kernel of the process, that led the group to interact and learn about practices. Behind this, was the assumption that creating spaces to dialogue on several education systems and pedagogical practices within them, would take to review not only practices but also conflicting issues of cultures involved in the process of dialogue. Hence, training was conceived as a process of building a joint working/learning space, while travelling the workgroup development needs: there wasn't a top –down structure of training, but a progressive growing up structure that would accompany teachers' reflection on practice: a sense-making process about different cultures sharing a common space of learning.

Three international seminars, were the several teams of every involved partner participated, attempted to make a difference as continuing training offered to the teachers: from the beginning, it was emphasized by the Research group the necessity of have time, space and responsibility: every teacher was supposed to produce a pilot, building on the large framework of PERMIT common strategies in order to implement intercultural dialogue, information that was progressively reinforced an deepen through the intervention of academics representing trends of research on intercultural education in the three countries involved. Discussions between teachers were then fundamental to create individual teaching projects. It was assumed that only through collaboration in both plenary sessions and broad subject groups teachers, across countries and diverse school programs, new approaches and created schemes of lessons out of their combined best practice could be forged. Hence, intercultural strategies within pedagogical practices were going to emerge from existing strengths and extensions of the vision of what was possible.

The necessity of give continuity to the process launched across the workshops was immediately evident: How could participants from several countries give continuity to collaboration, coming them from distant realities?

Teachers and their materials needed to *go virtual*.

4.1. *Creating the Space*

The University of Venice, that made the proposal of creating a platform to interact, came from a well developed experience on e-learning courses for initial teachers' training and in service training. Nevertheless, the idea of creating a space for a participatory approach was to be a complete challenge. Space was given important attention since the first seminar, aspiring to create a fraternity of teachers and support empathy the teacher look for in colleagues close at hand, on the modification and development of exemplar materials and to exchange teaching experiences in progress.

Beyond this, the space existed to keep to the forefront the aims and objectives of the project and to store information teachers may need in addition to teaching materials.

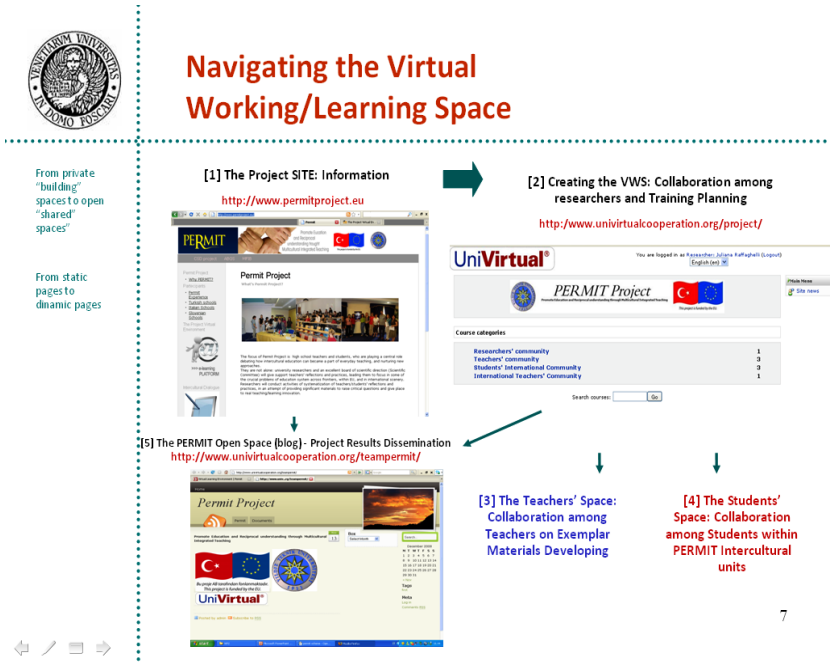
Furthermore, teachers, in my own vision, should not be seen as only "downloaders" of information, but they were going to become mainly *uploaders*[19]. My hypothesis was formulated on the bases of two main ideas:

- The development of Web 2.0 (above mentioned), that offered simple tools to invent, publish and exchange materials.
- Coherently with this vision of Internet, the claiming for teachers professionalism requiring a vision of teachers as creators, as researchers that go in deep understanding of their discipline (Margiotta, 2007) through teaching, and as authors of their own *learning objects* and teaching strategies. This active and reflective approach could be clearly supported by the possibility of publishing easily on the net, on one hand; but, on the other, after publish, Web tools could allow collaboration with colleagues and students, in an approach that could solve one of the main problems highlighted in teachers practices: the teachers' "professional isolation", that provokes fragmentation and lack of motivation for innovation.

The Space was designed regarding this conception[20], searching to adhere to the above mentioned training strategies. The Scheme 2, attempts to explain the Space structure and areas.

19 Based on Stephen Fry, who described Web 2.0 as: *"…an idea in people's heads rather than a reality. It's actually an idea that the reciprocity between the user and the provider is what's emphasised. In other words, genuine interactivity, if you like, simply because people can upload as well as download…."* Retrieved the 20-5-2008, from the Video on http://www.videojug.com/-interview/stephen-fry-web-20 .

20 In the process of Design of PERMIT webspaces, Prof. Alida Favaretto and Dr. Roberta Scuttari participated giving support as UNIVIRTUAL experts. The first, as Web designer, evaluated and implemented the proposal of webpages' architecture and contents; the second, followed the platform's use, creating and maintaining platform areas of work.



Scheme 2 – The original Idea

4.2. *The process of implementation of The Space*

As we may see at Table 5, from the First Residential seminar, teachers were invited to use the space to upload their materials and to interact, collaborating with ideas that could help them to develop their pilot experience.

The analysis of training phases, FTF and online learning activities, from the First to the Third Residential Seminar, allow us to understand how the space became more than an e-learning platform; in fact it evolved in a space of experimentation and sharing of reflections about *meanings* emerging from practices, finally discussed in residential meetings.

Table 5 -Training Contents & Activities by Phases of Process Development Blended Approach[21]		
Phase Description	Residential Seminars	Online learning
First Phase: Developing PERMIT Units Closed at Residential Seminars in Istanbul (Turkey) January- February 2009 Key Concept of the Phase: *"Cultural Values Influencing Schooling System"*	☐ The Autonomous-Relational Self, a new Synthesis[22], as dimension of cross cultural psychology to think teaching practices an diverse learning styles ☐ Cultural Values influencing Schooling System: Comparative Analysis through researchers' presentation and teachers working groups on teaching methods, tools, materials and learning environments (PERMIT research group)[23] ☐ Using the Virtual Learning Environment as a tool to communicate among teachers across frontiers (Venice University) ☐ Using of Portfolio to develop skills of reflection on intercultural teaching practice (Primorska University)	☐ Definition of PERMIT units' topics ☐ Contextualization of pedagogic practices ☐ Introduction of Units' themes ☐ Deepen on the topic of Intercultural Education ☐ Recognition of online learning environment ☐ Use of Portfolio to reflect on the process of developing the Unit. ☐ International discussions among teachers about PERMIT core ideas to promote intercultural learning.
Second Phase: Implementing PERMIT Units Closed at Residential Seminars in Koper (Slovenia) February-April 2009 Key Concept of the Phase *"Intercultural education within curricula design"*	☐ Linguistic policy and intercultural education in the market of knowledge[24] ☐ Intercultural education teaching units within the curricula, a glance at Primorska experiences [25] ☐ Analysis of PERMIT units through self assessment and peers discussion (PERMIT research group) ☐ Intercultural PERMIT units presentation (PERMIT research group) ☐ Introducing ICT on PERMIT units: learning in enlarged cultural contexts (University of Venice) ☐ Using of Portfolio to introduce Self-assessment of intercultural competence (both teachers and students)	☐ Coaching on Implementation ☐ Use of Portfolio tools to reflect on the process of evolution of intercultural competence: dimensions of intercultural competence and critical incidents in class that demonstrate intercultural learning ☐ Online experimentation: Teachers' creation of online learning spaces to develop intercultural awareness and interaction between students of Italy, Turkey and Slovenia ☐ International Discussions among teachers about students intercultural activities on online spaces ☐ Preparing Self-Assessment Progress of Unit

21 This Table have been built basing upon an interpretation of several project working documents, such as: Researchers communications on platform; "Training Approach" presentation at 2nd Scientific Committee –Venice-; Programme and Memos of 1st, Residential Seminar –Istanbul- , 2nd Residential Workshop-Koper-; 3rd Residential Workshop –Treviso-; internal Italian working documents of Instructional Design elaborated by Rita Minello and Juliana Raffaghelli (Italian research & training team)

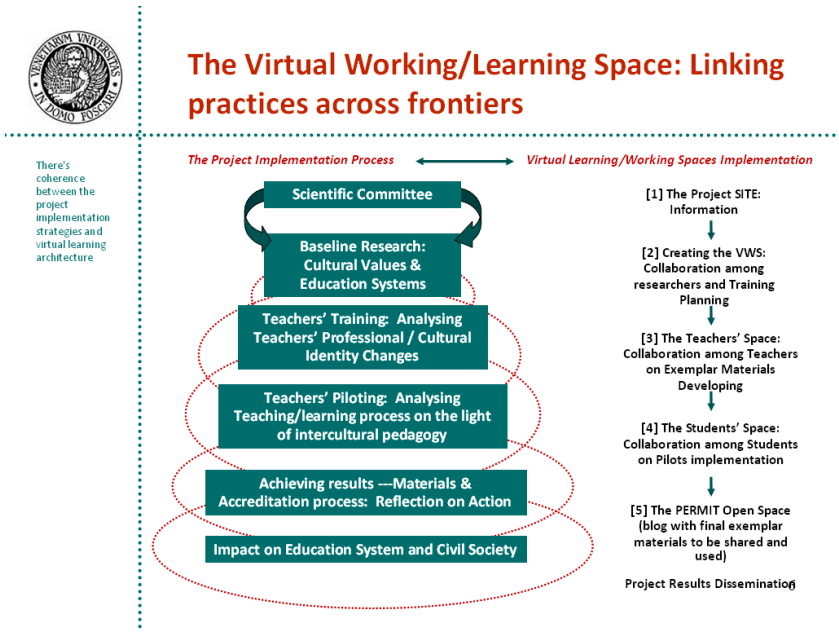
22 Key Note Speech. Prof. Cigdem Kagitgibasi, Koç University;

23 Permit Research Group stands for the International group, incharged of coordination of training/coaching activities, composed by researchers of Yildiz University, Primorska University, and Venice University;

24 Key Note Speech. Dr. Sonja Novak Lukanovi , Institute for ethnic studies, Ljubljana

25 Based on Results of Project LABICUM, University of Primorska, Prof. Lucija Çok

Third Phase: Evaluating PERMIT Units Key Concept of the Phase *"Towards Intercultural Learning: Analysis, Evaluation and Modelling - Impact of materials development and piloting activities"* Closed at Residential Seminars in Treviso (Italy) April-June 2009	☐ Learning the Difference: the age of intercultural learning. Best-Practices in Intercultural Learning: UWCAD experiences[26] ☐ Intercultural Pedagogy: Re-thinking Education from interculturalism [27] ☐ Social Representations within Intercultural Teaching[28] ☐ Discussing Self-assessment descriptors. From Intercultural Teaching to Intercultural Learning: Teachers, Students and Teachers Discipline Community results (PERMIT Research group) ☐ Reflexions on Effective Intercultural Teaching : "My best Lesson" (PERMIT Research group) ☐ Moving Forward: The Permit Dissemination Process ☐ A new approach for teachers' intercultural training [29]	☐ Coaching: Participatory Evaluation of Units with Students ☐ Coaching: Reflections about process: from Focus group to Products of Learning ☐ Teachers' Uploading to the Online Learning Space My Best Lesson ☐ Teachers' Uploading to the Online Learning Space First Students Results (excerpts of Students' products of intercultural learning, such as reflections, essays, pictures, workgroups, videos, etc.)
Forth Phase: Dissemination of PERMIT units Results Key Concept of the Phase: *Expanding PERMIT borders*	☐ Sistematizing Knowledge: the process of writing ◦ PERMIT Units (Exemplar Material) ◦ Article on Experimentation Process ☐ Dissemination of Knowledge: PERMIT teachers as trainers	☐ Publication of Final Version of Units to the Platform ☐ Feed-back on Evaluation of Units ☐ Feed-back to new teachers about use/experimentation of PERMIT Units

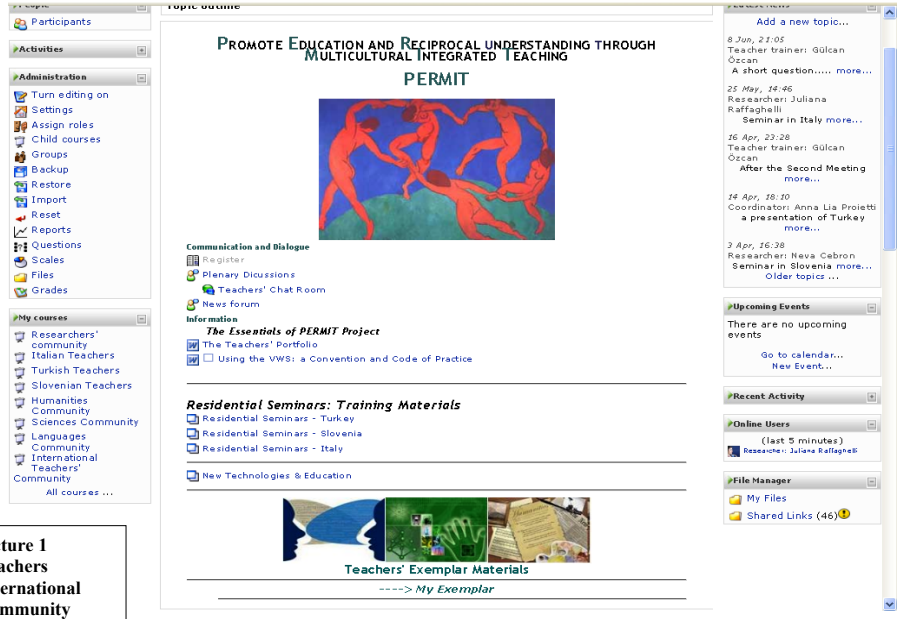


Scheme 3 – The coherence between process of project interventions and The Space development

26 Key Note Speech. Prof. Henry Thomas, United World College of the Adriatic Sea
27 Key Note Speech. Prof. Agostino Portera, Centro Studi Interculturali, University of Verona.
28 Key Note Speech. Prof. Esoh Elamé, Centro Interateneo per la Ricerca Didattica e la Formazione Avanzata, University of Venice.
29 Closure 3rd Residential Seminars Conference: Prof. Umberto Margiotta

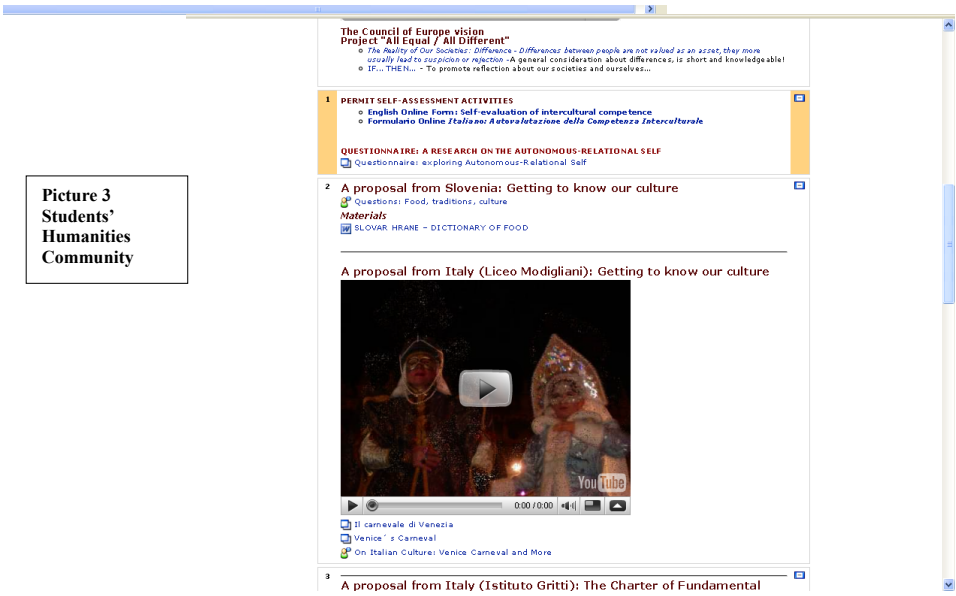
The Space adopted the appearance given by participants across the process of communication and joint work: the decisions taken by researchers, teachers and students about icons, words, titles and ideas were to represent the idea of a "common place" on the net.

Let's introduce and analyze some examples of those "live" rooms of joint work:



Picture 1 Teachers International Community

Picture 2 Students' Language Community



Picture 3 Students' Humanities Community

Picture 1 shows the International Teachers' Community, while picture 2 and 3 have been extracted from Students' Communities. As we can appreciate, several icons and also multimedia materials were put freely by users, according to the on-going communication process, as a clear representation of an experimentation of contact with otherness. Teachers Community where mostly structured by trainers (researchers), considering materials of Residential Seminars to guide teachers' experimentations, but also taking into account requirements and questions put by teachers about their practices; following trainers interventions, teachers started to develop Students' Communities. As we can see at picture 2 and 3, every community created "customized" activities mainly motivated to a) introduce the own culture to other students, reflectively, through stories, phrases, pictures, music and videos; b) carry out a common task, where students had to offer help to foreign peers with questions about the own culture.

Within this process, all communications and multimedia created by teachers and students shaped the Space.

4.3. Results and Perspectives of The Space's implementation

4.3.1. Outcomes I: The Space as the Matrix of shared knowledge

After the 3rd Residential Seminar, teachers evaluated the importance of the Space and it online tools[30] : 91, 67% of respondents considered that it was an useful tool to develop an intercultural professional identity, mainly because: …

30 From 19 questionnaires delivered through platform online form at the end of working sessions "After Training Questionnaires". In this case, the data comes from teachers of the three countries involved.

"it gave us the opportunity to see other colleagues didactic approaches, compare teaching perspectives, spark ideas, give help to other teachers, sharing materials."
The platform was generally considered useful to give teachers the idea of a working group "across frontiers", eliminating national barriers and borders; as it means a lot to students 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!"
"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...."

So forth, participating in an international community of teachers & students had impact in personal practice, because it was an opportunity to work with people from different educational contexts, bind by some ideas and beliefs, present on that "third space", the PERMIT international teachers community, which virtual representation could be considered a semiotic representation of a space (where iconicity and symbolism of shared words become "things" of common use), with it bases on a platform (technological correlate)

The platform could be then considered an instrument that supported some of the crucial processes of PERMIT approach: sharing experiences and working models; opening a window to the communication between students and teachers from the several national realities involved in the project.

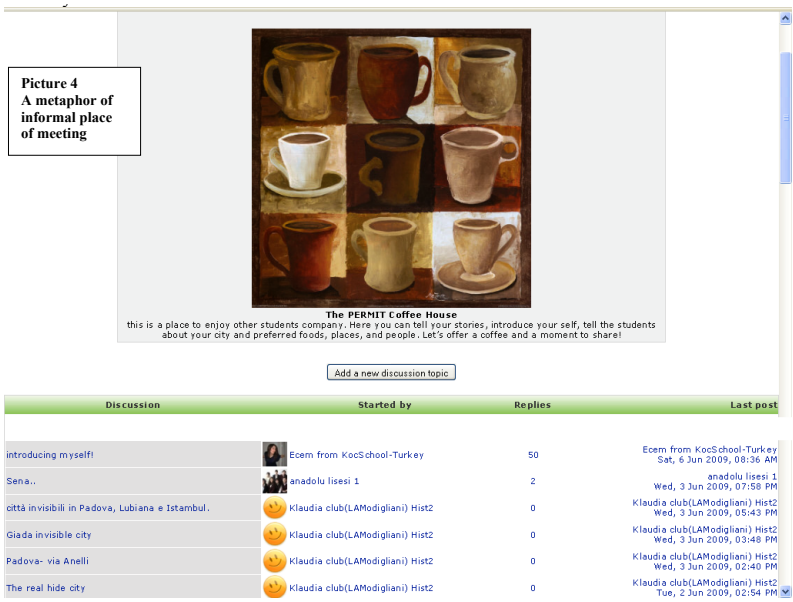
Nevertheless, the potential of this kind of tool is to be developed. Some teachers reported:

…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…;
…Technical barriers as equipments and teachers' skills are a problem to face if this kind of instrument is to be used…

4.3.2. Outcomes II. The sensemaking process: building metaphors of intercultural dialogue

Metaphors, as forms of language that express shared sense-making process, since they stimulate a "double process of semantic mapping", through the operation of linking one category to another, and thus condensing meaning (Mercer, op.cit; Lakoff, 1980). Metaphoric thinking is also deeply rooted by images (Lakoff, 1993). Is this cognitive base that makes frequent the use of metaphor in intercultural conversation. Within PERMIT, metaphors stared to circulate among teachers and students at a certain point, as metaphors emerged as part of the process of negotiation of meanings, in the effort of coming to understand the other's reality but also, of generate a common representation of activities.

A first metaphor, that of the online forum called "The PERMIT Coffee-House", was achieved to represent the need, felt by the group, of creating a "meeting point" to start free, informal interactions. This metaphor was launched through an image to illustrate a Students' area and the diversity contained in it.



Teachers discussed about pros & cons of this proposal at the International Teachers Community (Plenary Discussions Forum, Interactions 11 to 18: 6 participants); the main problem was the teachers' perception of risks that could encompass leaving the space too loosely connected to planned activities, and controlling students' behavior in this place –in-between the walls of the school and students' outside world. Teachers hence decided to give space to free contacts between students: this decision revealed to be positive, since the Coffee House allowed students to know personal and daily aspects of foreign students, supporting reflection about lifestyles and identities in several cultures. As it emerged from activities of feed-back from students to teachers (Italian Group), the impact was strong:

Original Transcription	English
…Non avremmo mai immaginato che una ragazza turca poteva essere la figlia di un medico e quindi aver viaggiato e conosciuto mondo più di noi(…) –Vocational Training School, Mestre, 14 May 2009-	*…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…*
…Leggendo sulla vita di questi ragazzi mi sono accorta che i loro gusti, i loro pensieri, le loro paure, sono molto simili a quelle mie… (Vocational Training School, Mestre, 14 May 2009)	*…Reading about the life of this kids I realized that their likes, their thoughts, their fears, are very similar to those of mine…*
…L'inserimento del tassello nel puzzle è una buona similitudine del rapporto che si è venuto a creare tra gli studenti italiani e gli studenti stranieri, turchi e sloveni, del progetto Permit. Infatti con questo progetto il puzzle si è completato e si è stabilito un rapporto importante e costruttivo tra tre culture molto diverse tra loro, ma allo stesso tempo accumunate dal desiderio di volersi conoscere e di volersi capire, lasciando da parte stereotipi e preconcetti. Per me il progetto Permit è stato un'importante rampa di lancio verso una conoscenza più approfondita di culture diverse dalla mia. (Art School, Padova, 28 May 2009)	*…The insertion of the dowel in the puzzle is a good example of the relationship that has emerged between Italian students and 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.*

Another significant metaphor, emerged from the Humanities group: that of "Skyline", the shape of cities seen against the skyline at the sunset. Linked to the idea of the several cities participating to the PERMIT puzzle of identities, the Skyline was the first symbol easily shared despite the difficulties of communication in English as "lingua franca" (in fact Humanities group suffered intensely the difficulties of negotiate a sense within a common project, having very different disciplines and backgrounds of experience). The teachers agreed first to exchange photos taken by themselves about the cities where they came from. Following this idea, they started to ask their students to take pictures, reflect about the "shapes and shadows", as visible and visible parts of the own city; and hence build on the shapes and shadows of other "PERMIT" cities.

It followed an introduction of the theme of cities on Lessons Plan, of very different disciplines as Design (as a mood to design mode); Literature (as a base to produce literary text and to introduce Italo Calvino's work "Invisible Cities"); Art (as a base to study the art of the different cities involved in the programme); History (as a mean to stimulate the study historical context of some buildings linking periods across cities).

The cognitive mapping process produced by this metaphor was also extended to another categories to represent intercultural dialogue: for example, the representation as an iceberg, with visible, evident (like Skyline) aspects of intercultural identity and invisible (hidden under the water or by the shadows).

This impregnation of common images through students' production, and teachers' reflections on their students works was a clear representation of the cognitive and emotional effort to build a common narrative of practices across frontiers and disciplines, negotiating a common, intercultural context of practice. Not given by the curriculum or imposed by the project coordination, but achieved by consensus from the first residential workshop (FTF), and strongly enough to represent, in the end, a *space* of common practices.

4.4. Final Reflections on The Space

Using net-based technologies for communication and specially to fostering professional communities is a challenge that requires a changing *mindset*. This challenge was pointed out through the several PERMIT meetings.

Italian teachers (but also the whole group) perceived the importance of the space, considering it a strong element of a "community across frontiers" like PERMIT, since extra energy was to be dedicated to explore and use technologies: working on the quality of materials to be published and shared with colleagues, fighting against traditions within institutions to take students outside the secure curriculum activities, and explore with students participating to the process the open possibilities of communication and sense-making, despite the great effort it demanded.

Therefore, knowing other local/national realities, and communicating with them through the use of "virtual" space was considered not only relevant, but crucial from an intercultural perspective, both in order to implement an innovating pedagogical practice and as a professional development opportunity.

All teachers emphasized the motivation and curiosity showed by their students about the different realities participating to PERMIT experience, being the Space a window to look *"outside the walls of the classroom/curriculum"*[31]: teachers hence

31 Teachers internal meeting, Venice, 15-5-2009.

stressed the need to enhance this motivation for educational innovation in class and at school, by introducing common activities "across frontiers", and the same students asked to keep on participating on the space to communicate with peers from other countries.

Considering this interest, my reflection was that the space offered by the classroom (physically delimited) and curriculum (symbolic delimitation) is becoming too narrow: what students and teacher are claiming for is a new *territory*, which frontiers are just the limits of *imagination*. This is were the Internet can play a role, not as technological resource, but as semiotic space: creating the coordinates of an *enlarged cultural context*.

5. Conclusions

Here my attempt is to raise some awareness about intercultural issues on e-learning environments, funding on the assumption that "intercultural education" on the net is possible –and valuable- for further intercultural dialogue. I assume that there's a process of creation of a semiotic space, a place where re-interpretation of the own experience, followed by new common narrative occurs. This in time could motivate people participating to international online communities not only to collaborate, and then to learn, but also to achieve an intercultural vision, being them invited to feel they are "out" of a certain cultural marked environment. In fact, the cyberspace isn't *my place* – with my cultural rules – or *your space*: through the means of *electronic conversation* it can become a third, new place (Rutheford & Kerr, 2008). The fact that the process is crystallised in written electronic text and icons used, let us believe that diversity is discovered, explored and kept in memory before arriving to *thirdness*. In this case study, this conception of interacting and learning in culturally hybrid virtual spaces introduces a new perspective of "otherness", since we could say that the Web is giving us the opportunity to create *enlarged cultural contexts* where to de-structure the own cultural identity, producing cultural awareness, and the sense of possibility of building new "peaceful" places (through a new sense of territory or virtual citizenship, practicing netiquette).

Will this encounter in online spaces have impact on places in the *real world?* This is a question that requires certainly further research.

Of course intercultural dialogue is based on intercultural competence, which is to say skills and a *"software of mind"* that are not easy to perform in a short period of contact with otherness.. Even more, as Hofstede recalls, *the place where we grew up constrains the way we think, feel and act (…)* and *culture is the unwritten book with rules of the social game that is passed on to newcomers by it members, nesting itself in their minds*[32]. In this author view, we can only intervene on practices, the more superficial part of individuals' cultural mindset.

Metaphors emerged and shared by teachers and students about their common teaching and learning activities, where clearly supported by the virtual working space; it promoted continuity of a process of sense-making, thus leading participants to live a kind of experience that allowed them to build new discourses about other cultures.

32 Hofstede, ibidem, p. 36.

The net -as part of a wider training vision- seems to offer the possibility to feature symbols and iconicity in a significant way, taking hence to recognition and re-signification of others' cultural symbols -metaphors-.

Returning to the point of online learning spaces as Communities places, or as Virtual Environment, I would like to make this point, concluding my argumentation: in effective learning processes (as the focus here of intercultural dialogue) technology seems to constitute a mean to allow *conversations*, which in time strength processes of sense making, inscribed into a *subjective reality*. Within this process, icons, words and symbols are used, building *new contexts to allow new narratives (text)*. In fact, as it has been emphasized by Sharples, Taylor & Valvoula (2007),

> *…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…*

The process of participating in a *virtual space* goes then far from building a "community of practice" (bottom-up vision) or creating a learning environment (top-down vision). There's a dialectical relationship between learning and technology[33], where interaction takes to a continuing process of reconstructing contexts through the exchange of symbols, icons, words, music, etc.

If technological space is adequately proposed, if it allows access to the crucial information, and then usability: the consequence could be the generation of a *semiotic space* where social rules are re-created and reinforced, there's engaging, and thus, *meaningful intercultural learning* occurs.

In this case, recalling the idea of *place* of meeting (an Agorà), the Space generated the perception of a room where people introduced their diversity, shared goals and activities, and recognized otherness. Perhaps this gave to the participants the idea of a classroom without walls, in an enlarged cultural context where the tension among differences in search for dialogue could take place.

If in the "real" (Face to face) educational spaces intercultural dialogue is heavily impregnated of the dominant-domestic culture (since activities are contextualized in a "place" with its past identity and history), the efforts of create "social" presence, introduce identities, and hence negotiating meanings, makes more evident the conception of "construction" of culturally hybrid human production. We should bear in mind, at this point, that these processes are not precluded to online learning environments : they are also possible in the physically situated learning experiences. The teachers' capacity to play with cultural voices and artifacts introduced by its students in class, but also by discourses and facts coming from the outside world, should be the cue to build "enlarged cultural learning environments". Of course the Web should have a key role in so doing. Much research will be necessary to analyze the way in which meanings from inside and outside "learning culture" of a certain group (in a certain classroom and school) are negotiated, producing culturally inclusive environments.

The "dialogic" in the intercultural perspective, is, in my view, somehow de-

33 Sharples et. al., ibidem, p. 231.

prived from the potentialities of creation of new, of hybrid, in that process of dialogue.

Hence, the recognition of spaces of dialogue as spaces of creation of new cultural meaning, where "learning minorities" live their own account and narrative, should be considered in education.

This does not entail a presumption of "equality" and consequently blurring of origins and belongings: a reflective approach to the process of meaning making, wisely conducted by the teacher, should enable dialogic processes that on one hand deconstruct beliefs, ideas, values, while working on the new knowledge and meaning construction.

As Bhabba puts out, building on the Bakhtinian perspective of hybridized new speech act (Bakhtin, 1981)

> "*...the concept of hybridity (…) makes possible the emergence of an* interstitcial *agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole...*" (Bhabba, 1996:58)

We should rethink *inter*cultural dialogue, and the *inter*cultural perspective within education, on this light, to avoid the commonplaces of naïve vision of otherness. A vision that keeps the *différence* far, that structures a stereotyped space for it within the dominant narrative in class -that of national curriculum, and of the teacher's personal beliefs-, pretending to *inter*act with it.

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