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Digital Intercultural Literacy and Study Abroad

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Abstract
This study describes the development of intercultural awareness through written online exchanges in the target language between a study-abroad student and foreign language students at the home institution. The analysis suggests that the positive process can be associated with the emerging dialogic discourse structure that occurred in the course of the semester.

Introduction
This case study explores the development of intercultural awareness through written online exchanges in a study-abroad context. The main subject of this study is an undergraduate learner of German at the University of Texas at Austin, who participated in a five-month-long exchange program. During his stay in Germany at the University of Würzburg, the study-abroad student corresponded through a blog with a German language class at his home institution. The correspondence suggests that these exchanges coincide with the development of intercultural awareness of the study-abroad student in Germany and some of the language learners in Austin. The analysis suggests that this process can be associated with the dialogic discourse structure that emerged over the semester.

First, I provide a research review in the areas of computer-mediated communication in language learning and the status of instructional technologies in study-abroad contexts. Then, I describe a case study in the context of a telecollaboration between a study-abroad student and a language class and analyze the online exchanges. I add pedagogical recommendations regarding the implementation of blogging activities that foster the development of intercultural skills to the conclusion.

Computer-mediated Communication, Blogging and Intercultural Awareness
Since the 1990s, researchers have investigated the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on language learning processes. Seminal studies by Beauvois (1997), Chun (1994), Kern (1995) established that asynchronous CMC can be effectively utilized to help language learners to develop a variety of skills. While these contributions related mostly to language learning,

some studies also investigated the potential of CMC technologies to engage learners with culture. Important contributions that have discussed the effectiveness of asynchronous CMC to help the learner to acquire critical intercultural awareness include Abrams (2003), Belz (2003), and Ware & Kramsch (2005).

The effectiveness of asynchronous CMC to help the learner to develop critical cultural awareness is usually attributed to the following factor: Learning environments that take advantage of asynchronous CMC usually create contact situations between a non-native learner and a native speaker of the target language. Thus, these learning environments expose the learner not only to a competent speaker of the target language, but also to an authentic informant who is a member of the target language communities and geographically situated in the target language community. Carefully designed learning environment have enabled collegiate students to gain authentic cultural insights and increased intercultural awareness through asynchronous CMC. A frequently cited example for such a project is MIT's *Cultura* project (Furstenberg et al., 2001).

Thanks to innovations in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, a variety of technological platforms provide asynchronous CMC opportunities. Whereas early projects were based on email correspondence, today's web-2.0-platforms are superior (Kim, 2008). These technologies include blogs, collaborative platforms such as wikis, social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and social-interactive media frameworks that are organized around video content (e.g. *YouTube*) or digital photography (e.g. *Flickr*). Today's learners increasingly use mobile devices to participate in web-based learning opportunities (Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo, Valentine, 2009).

Among web-2.0-technologies, blogs have gained attention from educators in a variety of disciplines (Kim, 2008). A blog is website maintained by an individual or a group with regular entries of postings and commentary. Blogs are primarily text-based, but they may also include images, video, and hyperlinks, and readers can leave comments in an interactive format. In educational contexts, blogs provide a platform for asynchronous computer mediated communication. Blogging activities are particularly well suited to help language learners to develop intercultural awareness. Blog entries are typically longer and feature more connected discourse in paragraphs compared to postings in social networking sites like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, where participants usually communicate on a sentence or word level. This writing-intensive environment helps learners to develop the necessary level of reflectivity in order to develop nuanced ideas about the own and the foreign cultural contexts. Blogging -- in contrast to "tweeting" or "facebooking"-- facilitate epistemic writing, a stage of literacy development where writing becomes a tool to reorganize incoming information and to develop complex thoughts, reflections, and viewpoints (Bereiter, 1980; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Mason & Boscolo, 2000; Tynjäla 1997). Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that a number of more recent scholars have explored the effectiveness and endorsed the use of writing-intensive internet technologies in fostering intercultural awareness in adult collegiate foreign language programs (Diehl & Prins, 2008; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Chun, 2011).

A further advantage of blogs over other social networking sites relates to the genre-specific content that users typically communicate: Blogs often function as online diaries. Journaling is an established practice in foreign language classroom (Fulwiler, 1982; Montague, 1995; Steffenson, 1988; Worthington, 1997) and fosters learning environments that target at the development of second-language writing skills and provides "a tool for reflection and therefore incorporates critical framing" (Kern, 2000, p. 193).

Instructional Technology and Study-Abroad

Until the 1980s the impact of study-abroad experiences on the linguistic, cognitive, and affective development of college-aged learners was not systematically researched. No theory-based pedagogical frameworks to this particular learning environment existed. Practitioners assumed that intercultural skills and advanced oral language proficiency would develop without explicit pedagogical guidance. Publications from this area therefore showcase best practices, but they almost never theorize these practices.

An important methodological development is responsible for a surge of systematic research activities that investigate cultural development of study-abroad students. Although a variety of models intercultural communication have been developed since the early 1990s (Ting-Toomey, 1993; Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997), the only theory that became widely accepted and pedagogically relevant to the study-abroad and foreign language education communities is Michael Byram's (1989, 1997) framework of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). It describes five competence areas: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical awareness or an evaluative orientation. Byram (1997) labels the interculturally competent discourse participant a "sojourner" and contrasts him/her to the less competent "tourist." These labels are particularly applicable in order to describe the particular identities study-abroad students develop vis-à-vis their environment.

Parallel to these methodological progresses, the 1990s mark the beginning of an unprecedented growth of the number of study-abroad participants. According to the Institute of International Education (2009), more than a quarter of a million American college students study abroad today. This figure has more than doubled in the decade between the academic years 1998-99 and 2007-08. This dynamic has provided an impetus for more systematic investigation of the actual impact of a variety of variables that constitute study-abroad experiences.

In spite of these developments, the contributions of telecollaboration and CMC in study-abroad contexts have remained under-investigated (Elola and Oskoz, 2008). Besides recent journalistic publications by Kowarski (2010) and West (2010) that uncritically showcase best practices, only few scholarly studies have analyzed the use of technology in study-abroad contexts. Earlier work focused on describing the role of internet technologies in recruitment initiatives or administrative matters (Myles 1995, Rhodes 1996, Leask, 2004). More recent scholarship explores the role of technology to foster learners' development of intercultural awareness. Goertler (2015) analyses the contributions of critical writing tasks in digital environments towards study-abroad participants' development intercultural awareness both before departure and during the stay in the host country. The case study described in the present article differs from the Goertler's approach in so far that a study-abroad student in the case presented here used a blog not merely

to reflect on experiences but to engage in a direct correspondence with language learners enrolled in an undergraduate course at the home institution. Paras and Mitchell (2016) stress the importance of written critical reflection for the development of intercultural awareness in study-abroad contexts. While their essay focuses on service learning program in developing countries, they conclude that the "use of written reflection throughout the field school provided an effective method of assessing student intercultural learning" and "provided a medium for students to make meaning of the own experiences." Analyzing blog entries in order to discover incidences of intercultural learning is methodological sound. Malleus and Slattery's (2014) analysis of personal travel blogs suggests that these digital texts "provide evidence of reflections on intercultural interaction taking place in a host culture that may be used by intercultural communications researchers." (p. 12).

Elola and Oskoz (2008) have conducted the only empirical study to date that investigates the role of blogging in study-abroad contexts with both participants in the host country and at the home university. They conclude that blogging has a positive impact on the intercultural development of both study-abroad and students at home. Their carefully designed study however does not elaborate in detail on the effect of the particular discourse structures that learners generate though blogging activities, and thus it only insufficiently clarifies the question, why these activities have a beneficial effect on the learner. In addition, Elola and Oskoz (2008) are more concerned with the intercultural development of the students at the home institution than that of the study-abroad students. Their instructional model is based on questions about everyday life in Spain that students at home generate and direct at their peers currently in Spain. Therefore, the present article must be regarded as an attempt to further theorize Elola and Oskoz's (2008) observation. I will not only approach the question, why blogging has a positive effect on the learners. Moreover, in the approach suggested in this article, it is the study-abroad student who initiates the blog discussions based on spontaneous impressions in Germany that describe a critical incident in their intercultural socialization. The students at the home institution then react to the articulated experiences of the study-abroad student.

Intercultural Blogs in Study Abroad Contexts: A Case Study

The data for this case study was collected in an exchange between the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Würzburg in Germany. The two institutions have an exchange agreement since 1978, and Würzburg has hosted more than 400 study-abroad students from the Univeristy of Texas. The programs include a reciprocal semester-long study-abroad exchange and a summer school at the University of Würzburg organized by the University of Texas' Department of Germanic Studies.

In spring 2010, John [2], an undergraduate student from the University of Texas, participated in a semester-long study-abroad change at the University of Würzburg. He had grown up and attended high-school in a small town in the Texas Panhandle, and only started learning German at the University of Texas in 2008. John had fulfilled his major's foreign language requirement by completing 240 hours of language instruction spread over three semesters before he departed to Germany. His majors were European Studies and Music. John volunteered to correspond on a regular basis via a blog with the upper-division class *Advanced German Grammar* at the University of Texas, a 5th semester course for upper-division students that provides a morpho-

syntactic review of German grammar and is organized around the textbook *Deutsche Wiederholungsgrammatik* (Donahue, 2009). In addition to this structural approach to German grammar, the instructor integrated two elements: A socio-cultural module, consisting of four sessions, was dedicated to the topic *Study and Work in Germany*, and an online component helped students to develop writing skills in a relatively unrestricted and unmonitored environment. The instructor developed in cooperation with University of Texas' Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Service a course website [3], on which the study-abroad student and course participant could exchange ideas and comment on each other's contributions in a blog. Participation in these exchanges was voluntarily, and no course credit was given for participating.

In January and February, the study-abroad student audited the class in Austin for a few weeks in order to get to know his future correspondents in a face-to-face setting. After his departure in February, John initiated five online discussions dealing with first impressions in Germany and his classes at the University of Würzburg. Four further discussions relating to the learners comments of the initial postings were initiated by the two graduate assistants for the course, and one discussion dealing with student protests at German and Austrian universities was initiated by the instructor. Usually, the initiators responded to some of these comments, which resulted in threaded discussions. All entries were written in German.

This study focuses on the five contributions submitted by John in order to describe the linguistic and cultural developments of this learner during his study abroad. In addition, the comments of his peers were analyzed qualitatively in order to describe the development of cultural awareness in participants from the German language class at the University of Texas. Data analysis was based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Glaser, 1992). Writing patterns were initially interpreted before analyzed using Boeije's (2002) approach to constant comparative methodology to identify emerging patters that throw light on how blogging activities demonstrate linguistic development and cultural awareness of the study-abroad student and the students in U.S.-State. The analysis looked for specific factors of extended online writing activities that contributed to both language development and intercultural perceptions.

Result I: Discourse Structure of the Blog

The discourse structure of the blog changed significantly over the period of the semester from a *monologic* towards a *dialogic* pattern. In the beginning many of the respondents at home ignored John's explicit questions and their peer's comments. They read the original posting for gist or main ideas and provided simple statements that were loosely related thematically to the initial contribution, but their reactions did not provide true responses to the original posting and the bloggers' comments. Later, after some intervention in the form of a more detailed instructions provided by the instructor in class, learners started to take advantage of the interactive opportunities that a blog provided and began to engage with the original blogger's ideas and their fellow students' responses through a dialogic discourse structure.

An example for the initially monologic pattern is the discourse initiated by John's first blog entry [4]. John's entry "Lernen in Deutschland" [5] was posted on March 22, 2010. He outlines the secondary school and university landscape in Germany critically and formulates explicit

questions towards the end of his 528-word posting. His questions relate to the difficult access to higher education in Germany, but also to the absence of elite universities, raising anti-American sentiments based on an increasing corporation of education in Europe, student protests, and the *Vorlesung* [6]. Thirteen students responded to the posting. Nine of the respondents problematized exclusively the topic of the German secondary school system in the comment and ignored the other issues raised by the original posting. Commentators did not respond to most of the ideas expressed in the original posting directly. Instead, nine bloggers picked up a single topic of John's comment that they comprehended and were familiar with, because the previous week the class had discussed the structure of the secondary school system in Germany. Correspondents did not use the blog to critically interact with new ideas and each others' comments. Instead, they used the blog as a forum to broadcast the perspectives that they had already formed in the classroom earlier that semester.

This discourse behavior resonates with the results of second-language literacy research. Countless studies have demonstrated that readers experience fewer difficulties comprehending a text, if they have not had an opportunity to build up adequate background knowledge about the topic prior to the actual reading activity. In contrast, regardless of their linguistic preparedness, learners generally experience fewer difficulties to comprehend a text, if they have built up background knowledge about the topic prior to the reading process (e.g. Grabe, 2009). In the correspondence with the study-abroad student, the class in U.S.-State elaborated mostly on the structure of secondary education in Germany for the simple reason that due to the background knowledge they were sufficiently equipped to comprehend and to formulate comments in response to this familiar topic.

In the beginning of the following class meeting the instructor made two interventions in order to help the students to develop the blogging environment from a monologic discourse into an interactive collaborative discourse: (1) He reminded the classroom learners of their role in the exchange and underlined the importance to carefully read not only John's posting, but also the comments of the classmates who had already responded. (2) In order to take full advantage of the blogging activities, he encouraged learners to use the same kind of interactive discourse that they were familiar with from social-interactive websites.

In his second entry [7], posted on March 29, John composed the entry "Wohnen in Würzburg als Student." [8] John's posting relates to the living situation, his cost of living, and the meal options that the University of Würzburg offers at the student union. The discourse that the group generated as a result of the instructor's intervention in class and a new topic introduced by John represents a development away from the narrow structure described above. This posting stimulated again thirteen responses. Learners discussed primarily the difference in cost of living between Germany and North America, but they also elaborated on the significant differences in housing costs that exist within their region of the country. The comments indicate that students have read and internalized the previous postings. Several student comments address the author of the original blog comment directly with collocations such as "_student11_ hat Recht" [9] or "Ich stimme mit John zu…" [10]. Another student uses discourse convention that is symptomatic for the language produced in social networking sites and starts paragraphs with the name of a classmate, followed by a colon and the comment directly addressed to this individual.

> _student4_ (und _student11_): Ihr seid beides in der Recht. Stimmt, die Deutschen verdienen weniger Geld pro-Kopf, und es kommt am meisten von die Deutsche Bewegung, Inflation zu verhindern. [11]

The contrast between the first and second postings illustrates that the development from a monologic discourse structure to a dialogic discourse structure was attributable to a conceptual response rather than a linguistic deficiency. Given the ubiquitous nature of this form of interaction on the internet, it is surprising that most learners did not utilize the dialogic rules of this discourse system from the beginning of the term. Possibly, learners aware and highly competent in this form of interaction were inhibited at using the informal vernacular of social-interactive media frameworks because these conventions stand at odds with what is traditionally considered adequate register and style of academic writing environments.

Result II: View of the 'Other'

The blogging activities of both the study-abroad student and the language students in Texas changed the participants' perceptions of socio-cultural fabric of their environments and how they contrasted socio-cultural phenomena from the native environment with that of the target culture. After initially focusing of *cultural differences*, later blog entries become more nuanced elaborate on *similarities and universalisms*. John's task was to document and discuss everyday experiences and observations that for some reason appeared noteworthy to him. In the beginning of the exchange, John mostly pointed out the differences that occurred to him on. His first posting that describes the different structures of education systems in German and the United States. His posting exclusively elaborates on differences (3-tiered vs. 1-tiered high-school tracks; absence and presence of elite universities; absence and presence of substantial tuition fees), and although he mentions differences within the United States (private vs. public universities), he does not elaborate on these intracultural differences.

The thread on apartment and rent, however, illustrates a development from the focus on intercultural differences towards intracultural differences. John and his interactants initially discuss exclusively the differences between cheap apartments in Würzburg in contrast to more expensive offerings in Austin. However, this discussion's focus shifts when one commentator suggests that the relative size and importance of Austin within its geographical constellation justifies the higher costs of living. Subsequent interactants support this point. Würzburg, in their view, shares more similarities with more provincial and affordable cities like Amarillo, Lubbock or San Marcos. Austin, on the other hand, can be better compared to major centers of a similar-size, such as the city of Frankfurt. The learners' interaction shifts from a discussion of rentals in Würzburg to more abstract explorations of socio-geographic factors that account to regional variations in cost of living.

The last thread of the semester led to a further perceptual consideration. Instead of focusing on differences, John points out similarities, and he elaborates on the universalities of student life in both countries: In both places, he has encountered students that are eager to learn as well as unmotivated ones; and he has attended classes that are more or less well designed and instructed. His ultimate motivation, to learn and to strive for understanding, forms his identity as a student

both at home and abroad. In order to illustrate the similarities between students in Germany and in the United States, John uploaded an image that he took a few days earlier in front of the student cafeteria in Würzburg. The image captures a poster that announces a poster sale. He points out that an identical event takes place on a regular basis at the student union at the University of Texas at Austin. In response bloggers in Austin responded with expressions of amazement and disappointment to this parallelism.

The shift from the focus on cultural differences to cultural similarities can be viewed a positive learning outcome for John, the study-abroad student, because it suggests his increased level of comfortability in the foreign language setting. Initially, John had reported on features of the foreign environment he found strange or even estranging. However, his later entries reflect a more nuanced and balanced perception of both his L1 and L2 environments. He appears to understand that socio-cultural configurations of the target culture cannot always be simply explained by juxtaposing them with configurations in the home culture. The fact that the shift from the focus on cultural differences towards similarities was initiated at the same point that the participants developed the discourse from a monologic structure into a dialogic structure is suggestive: It may be that the dialogic form led interactants to respond to and articulate views of self and of other in more reflective ways. The blogging process constructed as an exchange between participants writing in two cultural contexts progressed through distinct states and helped learners to develop a more reflective view of the other culture and the self.

Conclusion

The analysis of the correspondents between the study-abroad student and the students enrolled at his home institution suggest that blogging helps the study-abroad student to make the transition from Byram's (2007) 'tourist' to the 'sojourner'. The findings confirms the scholarly consensus that telecollaboration can foster intercultural competence. With its focus on discourse structures, the present study goes beyond Elola and Oskoz (2008) and shows not only that, but why study-abroad students and their peers at home can benefit significantly from sharing experiences vis-à-vis a foreign culture via a blog. Admittedly, these processes cannot be directly attributed to the blogging activities itself. However, the blog gave the study-abroad student an opportunity to reflect and articulate this process. Interestingly, John's development towards a more nuanced view of the 'Other' can be directly traced in the changing discourse structure of the blog. This transition happened only after the students explored the blog's dialogic potential. A further benefit of this particular telecollaboration between the study-abroad student and a class at the University of Texas was that some of the learners in Texas seemed to have experienced a similar transition from the curious bystander to the interculturally competent and engaged discourse participant.

I will conclude by formulating a set of pedagogical recommendations and directions for future research that directly respond to the limitations of the present study and existing research database:

- In order to foster the development of intercultural awareness, study-abroad students should participate in writing-intensive activities that help them to reflect and articulate their intercultural experience. This does not have to happen in an online environment.

However, the technology would amplify the positive effect of writing, because the authors have an audience and can engage in an exchange of ideas with the readers.

- Telecollaborative exchanges can support the intercultural educational objectives of study-abroad programs. The present case study indicates that these technologies not only enrich the experience of study-abroad and students at the home institution, they can at the same time motivate students at the home institution to participate in study-abroad opportunities.

- The case study suggests that the main role of the instructor is to support participants to develop a dialogic discourse dynamic in the blog. The analysis of the blog exchanges indicates that this discourse structure fosters the development of intercultural awareness among the participants, but learners do not automatically to take advantage of this particular potential that blogs offer.

- Future research on intercultural development in study-abroad contexts has to focus on the role of writing-intensive learning environments. The bulk on research on intercultural development focuses on the impact of this learning environment of the development of interpersonal communicative skills. Based on existing research on second-language literacy research and the findings of the present case study, it makes sense to supplement these approaches through a variety second language writing activities.
- Future research on intercultural development in study-abroad contexts has to further assess the role of social interactive technology. These studies must also include the affective dimension of technology use, because individual learner's differences and preferences have a significant impact on the effectiveness of learning technologies. In particular, research that assess study-abroad students' use of mobile devises and Internet vernaculars in order to connect to local and global communities would help to design effective technology-enhanced study-abroad learning environments. In order to solidify the presented results, future research should work with larger subject pools and employ statistical methods to describe and analyze the benefits of blogging for study-abroad students and their peers at home.

- Future research on the role of instructional technologies to foster intercultural development in study-abroad context has to focus on technologies associated to the digital humanities. Such technologies will provide more solid connections between the academic program at the home institutions and the study-abroad student. Especially applications that allow study-abroad students to critically visualize special dimensions of their intercultural experiences through digital maps seem to be very promising in study-abroad learning environments.

Endnotes

[1] This article updates and extends a previous study published in Academic Exchange Quarterly (Intercultural Blogs in Study-Abroad Contexts, 2011, Per Urlaub)
[2] Name changed
[3] http://wikis.la.utexas.edu/328wiki/

[4] http://wikis.la.utexas.edu/328wiki/blog/lernen-deutschland
[5] Translation: Learning in Germany
[6] A *Vorlesung* is a formal, large-scale lecture series that German university students attend regularly without earning credit.
[7] http://wikis.la.utexas.edu/328wiki/blog/wohnen-w%C3%BCrzburg-als-student
[8] Translation: Living as a student in Würzburg
[9] Translation: "_student_11 is right"
[10] Translation: "I agree with John…"
[11] Translation: "_student 4_ (and student11_): Both of you are right. It's true, Germans earn less per capita, and it has a lot to do with Germany's movements against inflation."

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