Cultural Transfer and Language Learning:
An Action-Oriented Approach for
the Co-Construction of a Shared Culture of
Sustainable Development through Telecollaboration

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Abstract: This paper explores the notion of cultural transfer in the context of cross-cultural communication in language learning. Our practice report describes a telecollaboration project between future teachers of French as a foreign language in a French university and learners of French in an American university. Following the model of *Le français en (première) ligne* (Develotte et al. 2007), the future teachers learned to be online tutors by conceiving and administering tasks to real learners through computer-mediated communication. For the foreign language learners, the online exchanges provided an authentic setting not only to practice their skills for spoken interaction but also to learn about sustainable practices in France and to compare them with practices they researched in the US. For the trainee teachers, the telecollaboration was an opportunity to develop professional skills through experiential learning, while also allowing them to serve as mediators of culture on the theme of environmental sustainability for the language learners. Ultimately, the two groups co-created a shared culture of sustainable development. After presenting the design of the telecollaboration project, we show how the co-creation of a shared culture of sustainable development evolved from critical analysis of multimodal online documents, culminating in the development of a charter for the organization of eco-responsible campus events at the French university. We also show how the French trainee teachers used the online environment—an LMS and a videoconference platform—to design tasks and deliver pedagogical guidance such as instructions and feedback.
Keywords: *cross-cultural communication, multimodality, videoconferencing, language education, teacher training, ecology.*

Introduction

This practice report describes an ongoing telecollaboration project between learners of French at University of California, Berkeley (UCB) and future teachers of French as a foreign language at Aix-Marseille Université (AMU) in France. Focused on the theme of the environment, the project takes

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an inquiry-based approach with emphasis on the cyclical process of research (questioning, observation, analysis, and more questioning) to foster learning about policies, sustainable practices, and attitudes in both countries and to engender critical dialogue ["regards croisés"] leading to new transcultural insights and (potentially) social action.

We conducted this study during the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when educational institutions around the world were embracing distance learning. Distance (and difference) are always implicit in foreign language learning since the content matter is by definition "foreign" and even the most basic aspects of daily life that one might imagine to be similar often turn out to be quite different. A basic objective of this project was to combine the use of primary sources (documentary research, local community research in France and California) with distance learning (comparative discussion of findings with online partners) to learn about similarities and differences in policies, attitudes, and on-the-ground practices related to environmental sustainability. The project thus integrated principles of experiential learning (i.e., John Dewey's notions that knowledge is grounded in direct experiences that contextualize information, and that education "is the fundamental method of social progress and reform" (1897: 80) with the U.S. Library of Congress's tools for the analysis of primary sources (LC 2020). The project follows directly in the spirit of the interschool exchanges endorsed by Célestin Freinet (1948, 1994) and more recently represented by telecollaboration projects such as *Le français en (première) ligne* (Develotte et al. 2007). By incorporating a distance/difference dimension via telecollaboration, the project aims to enhance learners' awareness of the social, cultural, historical, geographic, and linguistic realities of their own community by virtue of their need to describe these realities in response to their distant partners' questions (Cummins & Sayers 1995: 137). *Distance* thus involves more than geographical separation but also a certain shift in perspective on the world and on oneself, along the lines of the goal promulgated by the 2007 MLA Report that learners should "reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture... to grasp themselves... as members of a society that is foreign to others" (2007: 4). At the same time, we aimed to highlight diversity *within* cohorts, recognizing that in a globalized society we are all increasingly pluricultural individuals. In our project, we examine students' cross-cultural communicative competence (Chomsky 1965; Hymes 1971). We further rely on the understanding of cultural transfer as "the cultural interference caused by cultural difference" (Melinte 2012: 60) and approach the phenomenon as "a highly interactive, polivocal and elastic concept" (Bal 2001; Rossini and Toggweiler 2014).

We chose environmental sustainability as a theme because it is a current societal preoccupation, a cause both our universities are actively committed to, and a concept linked to key developments throughout French cultural history. Study of the environment has been a component of primary and secondary education in France since 1977. France was the first country to add a Charter on the Environment to its Constitution in 2004, and in that same year, the national curriculum was expanded to include sustainability, with numerous French schools receiving ratings for their sustainable practices. More recently, France

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emerged as a world leader in sustainability efforts during the 2015 Paris Accord on climate change. Furthermore, environmental themes have long been represented in French literature and the arts, and are deeply woven into the French psyche. For the UCB students, then, the study of French texts, art, and regional case studies was designed to motivate them to develop an 'insider's perspective' into French culture. For the AMU students, it was partly to discover Californians' practices and perspectives, and principally (because of their professional orientation) to gain experience in designing learning opportunities for students of French language and culture.

Theoretical Underpinnings

In designing our project, we drew on four strands of research. First, we position the design of the learning environment and activities within sociocultural theories of learning (e.g., Hampel & Stickler 2015; Van Compernolle 2016), which means that we conceive learning as the co-construction of knowledge and skills through the mediation and internalization of psychological tools (Vygotsky 1978) anchored in a given sociocultural context (Bruner 1990). Second, we base the training within experiential learning both for the appropriation of critical digital design (Pangrazio 2016) and for teacher education (Vinagre 2017). Third, we acknowledge the limits of formal learning in pre-service teacher education, both in terms of concentrating teacher education for CALL in a particular course (Hubbard 2008) and the future obsolescence of training focused only on current technologies (Kern 2015). Regarding the former, although the project was integrated into a single course at AMU, this course was linked to others in the curriculum, such as digital literacies, designing learning sequences, and autonomous language learning. The issue of future obsolescence brings us to the fourth underpinning, which is a relational pedagogy as proposed by Kern (2014, 2015). In such a pedagogy, the focus is not on a particular set of technologies, but on a broader set of heuristics to analyze the relationship between technological mediation and "language use, communication, cultural expression and social meaning" (Kern 2014: 352).

Design of the Telecollaboration Project
Participants and their contexts

Participating in the telecollaboration project were 28 students at the University of California, Berkeley enrolled in two sections of intermediate French, and 18 Aix-Marseille Université students preparing for a Masters in Teaching French as a Foreign Language. The AMU students were enrolled in courses entitled "Designing and Teaching an Online Course" and "Digital Literacies," which sought to foster students' abilities 1) to select multimodal texts and create lessons based on them, 2) to give clear directions and corrective feedback online, and 3) to become aware of their value system and to adapt it to the communicative situation in three distinct settings. In these courses, students produced multimodal discourse in three distinct spaces, each with its particular communicative dynamics: a pre-recorded self-presentation video, an asynchronous discussion forum within the UCB's Learning Management

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System, and videoconferenced interactions via Adobe Connect (sponsored by AMU). Encounters between AMU and UCB students therefore developed progressively. Taking into account the UCB French curriculum, we agreed on the theme of sustainable development and opted for the discovery and elaboration of a specific discursive genre: the charter. This choice was made in order to align the students' final products with both social action and institutional aspiration. Indeed, since the AMU Office of Sustainable Development wanted to have the university administration vote on a charter of eco-responsible events, such a charter first had to be created!

In this study we will focus on three AMU graduate students (Carole, Alain, and Natacha), and the eight UCB students who partnered with them for asynchronous and synchronous exchanges in spring 2019. Carole's partners were Kim and Jane; Alain partnered with Sam and Ines; Natacha had exchanges with four UCB students: Jenny, Catie, Mira, and Monica.

Learning Objectives and Approach

For the UCB students, the learning objectives were to develop ability to engage in authentic cultural discussions, to write analytically about texts, to think interculturally and consider multiple perspectives, and to learn how to use technology effectively and critically—all while learning about policies, sustainable practices, and attitudes in both the US and France. The AMU students' courses were aimed at developing techno-pedagogical competencies (Guichon & Hauck 2011: 189), defined as understanding the affordances of online tools for designing learning tasks, fostering interactions, and providing effective feedback, among other things. Finally, both groups shared a common learning objective of developing a critical understanding of sustainable development issues via multimodal documents to enable them to collaborate and produce a charter for sustainable practices.

Our approach drew on task-based language learning (Ellis 2003) as it has been reconceptualized in terms of task sequences (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann 2017). The exchanges were organized as follows:

1. Self-presentation videos pre-recorded by the AMU students in pairs.
2. Asynchronous exchanges on the UCB Canvas Learning Management System (bcourses) between pairs of UCB and AMU students, based on the self-presentations and other activities.
3. Synchronous exchanges via videoconference (using Adobe Connect). The three videoconferencing sessions involved a sequence of three tasks: 1) a multimodal analysis of three documents related to sustainable development (L'impossible développement durable, L'UNESCO et les objectifs de développement durable and the commitments of the Nestlé firm in France in favor of sustainable development), 2) analysis and discussion of the genre of the charter, based on documents chosen by the AMU students, and 3) the collaborative writing of a charter for the organisation of eco-responsible events at AMU. The biggest challenge of videoconferencing was scheduling a time that would work for both groups, given the 8-9 hour

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time difference. The first two sessions were done in computer labs; the third session was done from students' residences.

Gathering together all the charters they produced, the students assembled a single composite charter for an eco-responsible event that they then sent to the Office of Sustainable Development at AMU. Finally, the AMU students were asked to write a ten-page synthesis reflecting on their engagement with all the above activities, incorporating references to relevant research.

Outcomes

In this section we present the affective responses and competencies we observed in the students, as French learners (UCB) and as teachers in training (AMU). First, both groups of students responded enthusiastically to their telecollaboration. In her final paper, Natacha noted that "the development of my digital biography allowed me to reflect on my personal taste for the communication tools we use to access the world and reduce distances. [...] For me, the fact that I could participate in this course and this research project... has brought me much personal satisfaction, thanks to the fusion of two of my passions: communication and teaching." In their video self-presentations, all three AMU students emphasized their anticipation of sharing with their Californian partners (Alain said, "we really look forward to starting the tutoring with you"; Natacha expressed her desire "to learn with you," and Carole hoped "to be able to share all of that with you"). This set the tone for very positive interactions. The UCB students conveyed their enthusiasm in three chief areas:

1- the videoconferencing exchanges, in which they used new vocabulary (e.g., *avoir* hate) and exclamation points. Thus, Ines wrote to Alain: *"J'ai hâte de travailler avec vous!"* [I look forward to working with you!]. Having asked questions about recent legislation and environmental practices in France, Monica wrote to Natacha: *"J'ai hâte de recevoir votre réponse!"* [I look forward to receiving your response!].

2- the topic of environmental sustainability, about which Kim wrote to Carole that she was *"passionnée sur le mouvement 'zéro déchet'"* and Mira expressed her eagerness to discuss climate change with Natacha (*"j'ai hâte [de] le discuter avec vous!"*). Ines has written to Alain of the importance of living a sustainable life in the present context (*"Je pense que vivre une vie durable est très important, notamment maintenant."*) Jane engaged in cross-disciplinary reflection, drawing a connection between political economy and environmental science when she wrote to Carole: *"Maintenant, je ne sais pas ma matière principale, mais j'aime l'économie politique et la science de l'environnement! Dans le futur, je voudrais améliorer les politiques publiques – l'UN est mon rêve! J'aime aussi cuisiner et manger alors 'zéro déchet' est très important pour moi!"* [Right now, I don't know what my main subject is, but I like political economy and environmental science! In the future, I would like to improve public policies – the UN is my dream! I also like to cook and eat, so 'zero waste' is very important for me!]. By suggesting

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a link between cooking and the zero-waste movement, Jane further indicated a nuanced understanding of the relationship between environmental efforts and everyday individual practices.

  3- the study of French language and culture. Sam wrote to Alain of his interest in French because it is a language "spoken in many places around the world" and his interest in diplomacy [*Je suis intéressé au français parce que c'est parlé à plusieurs places au tours du monde, et je veux être diplomat un jour*]. In her correspondence with Natacha, Mira wrote: "*je m'intéresse français parce elle est belle et elle a beaucoup de similarité avec l'anglais*" [I am interested in French because it is beautiful and it has a lot of similarities with English].

  Second, the project encouraged personal investment and friendship. At the outset, all eight UCB students used a more formal register of French compared to their partners from AMU (using *vous* to address their partners and starting their correspondences with *bonjour,* as opposed to their AMU partners' use of *tu,* informal greetings *salut* and *coucou,* and symbols like (hug) and <3). However, as the exchanges unfolded, all the UCB students increasingly volunteered personal information about themselves, sharing information about their studies, and, in some cases, detailing their hobbies. Mira wrote to Natacha of her love of films; Kim shared with Carole details about her leisure activities, writing in French: "I like to watch TV Netflix (especially *Game of Thrones*!), to memorize poems, and to stroll all around UC Berkeley." Here, Kim used the French verb *flâner* to describe her strolling, a term that had been presented in class a week earlier, in a module on Parisian life. In this module, students were introduced to the historical and cultural values embedded in the verb *flâner* in relation to the urbanization of Paris and the growth of its streets and its crowds in the 19th century. While Kim may have not had all the layered cultural references of the verb *flâner* available to her French interlocutor, she was able to personalize the use of the term and use it to describe her daily activities in UCB in 2019. The interactions also offered an opportunity for furthering students' plurilingual and intercultural competence given the diversity within each of the groups. Natacha emphasized her origins and status as an international student, saying "We learn French in order to teach French" and insisted on her multilingualism: "I am from Brazil. I speak Portuguese of course. I speak French, I speak English, a little bit of Italian, and Spanish." Alain was keen to demonstrate his command of English when his partners Sam and Ines seemed not to understand him. The UCB students were also linguistically and culturally diverse, and one (Monica) was an international student from Spain. They had interests in global studies, international politics, neuroscience, biology, economics, and environmental science. Both groups were thus able to draw from their multilingual and multicultural diversity during their exchanges.

  Third, students engaged deeply with the ecological theme of the exchange. Pursuing a common interest in food and the environment, Carole and Jane co-created a charter on sustainable practices related to food waste. During one videoconferencing session, Jane shared images of food recycling practices

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taken from a local supermarket in Berkeley, while Carole provided input on the guidelines that Jane had formulated and took notes during the exchanges (Figure 1). The charter they developed together included a reflection on food quantities, home cooking versus buffets, selection of local products, and vegetarian diet. Together, they concluded, in the discussion notes, that "buffets are harmful for the environment" due to excessive food waste and emphasized the need to select the right quantities of food and the restaurants that provide it. [*Les buffets sont nocifs pour l'environnement: trop de nourriture par rapport aux besoins des participants. Fait trop de déchet. Privilégier la bonne quantité et les restaurants pouvant le faire.*] Through this exchange, the two co-created a shared culture of sustainable development by critically analyzing practices and lifestyles representing a variety of attitudes toward food consumption and food waste. Their synchronous session included multimodal exchanges involving a visual image, textual production, and the use of the online platform's different features (sound, video, chat, notes).
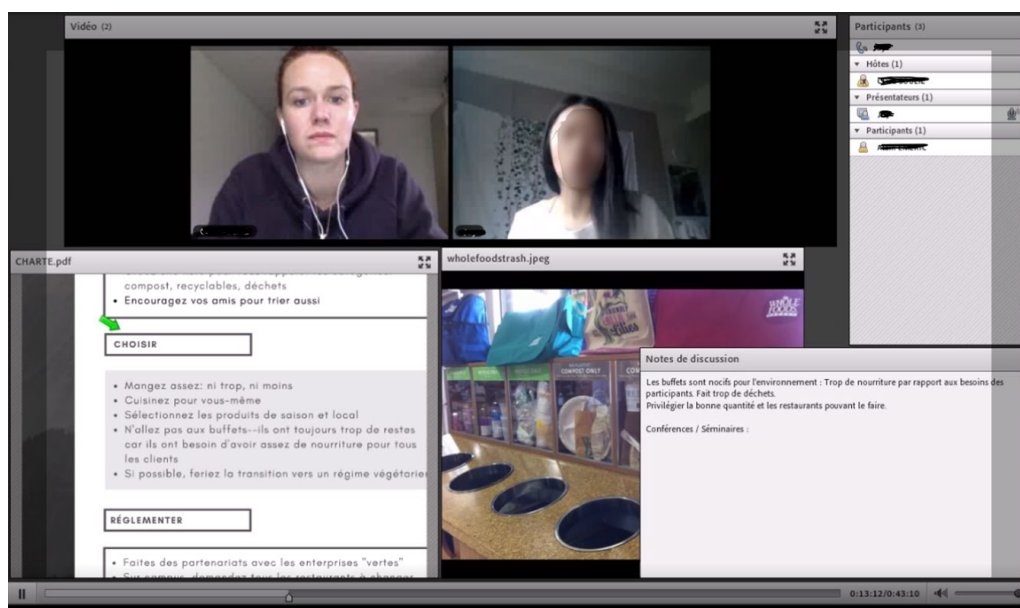

Figure 1. Carole and Jane discussing food recycling practices

Following lively discussion, Natacha and Jenny extended their focus beyond the planned lesson framework. In the example below (Figure 2) Natacha bounces off of Jenny's comments about drought and proposes new reading to follow up:

> Natacha: Eh Jenny if you allow me because it's very interesting what you just said about water because I read an article yesterday that said that after seven years you have how we say a wave of butterflies because you have no problem it starts to rain again and there are a lot of butterflies in California right now is it true?

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Jenny: I don't know because I just stay just in Berkeley and there aren't a lot of butterflies

Natacha: Because I'm going to share something with you I know it is and you tell me if it's correct or not you can after comment but there he says that [Natacha shares an internet link in the chat to an article that talks about this].
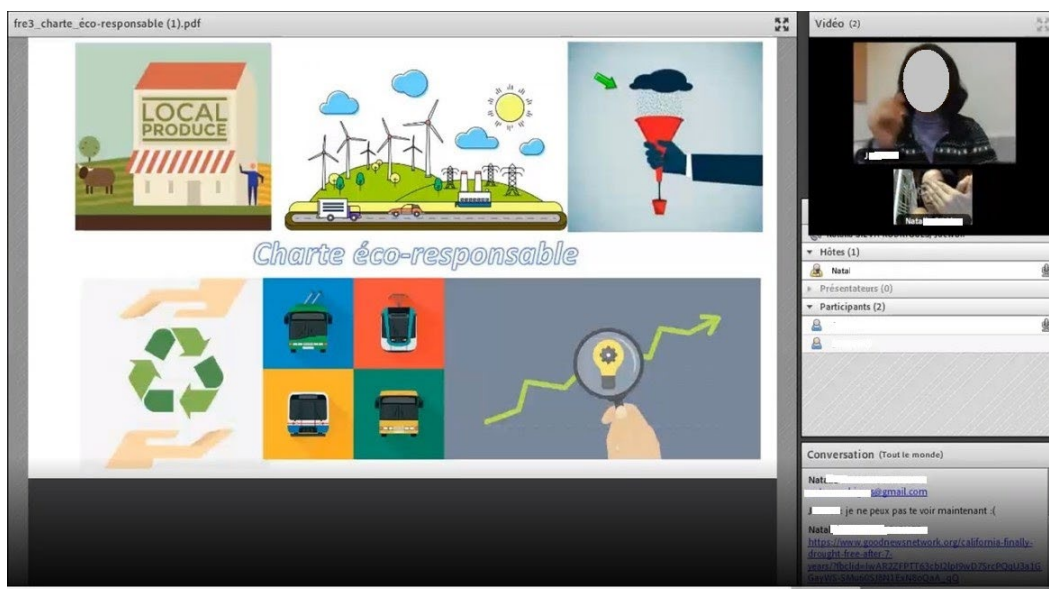

Figure 2. Natacha (lower image) mimes the butterfly

AMU students asked questions that demanded close analysis and evaluation. For example, in his reflection paper, Alain reports asking his Berkeley partners Sam and Ines "if the objectives announced by the charter are achievable by the actions announced, and if this approach is part of a sustainable development perspective." By the same token, UC Berkeley students asked analytic questions as well. For example, after the second synchronous session, Monica wrote to Natacha:

> I read the link you sent and I have a question about both the article and the Charter for the Environment. The article indicates that there were lots of environmental protests in Europe, so has the Charter succeeded in addressing environmental problems in France or not much? Also (this has to do more with the Charter) were there companies that changed their locations to other countries in response to the Charter? [our translation]

What is striking here is Monica's last question: "Were there companies that changed their locations to other countries in response to the Charter?" Besides being effective in generating discussion, the question is additionally rich because it reveals a particular cultural stance, one that assumes that a particular political standpoint would have concrete consequences with those who oppose it, such as relocation. It is indicative of a cultural viewpoint toward a particular relationship to politics that can be encountered in the US.

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Students also showed development in competencies in their multimodal media literacy, ability to analyze texts, and (for the AMU students) flexibility in their approach to teaching. AMU students in particular developed their multimodal media literacy in the digital context. Here, instances of cultural transfer were noted. First, they created a video presentation in pairs that they sent to the UCB students. The analysis of the three presentation videos shows that each student created an original scenography, with varying degrees of creativity (Figure 3). Alain's video is simple: he recorded himself seated indoors, in close proximity to the camera, with a nondescript background. Carole, on the other hand, chose a humorous montage (she is wearing antlers), and concluded her video with a blooper edited in black and white. Natasha opted for a low angle shot, taken outdoors, that starts with a "malfunction" that was highlighted in a humorous way by a black-and-white montage.
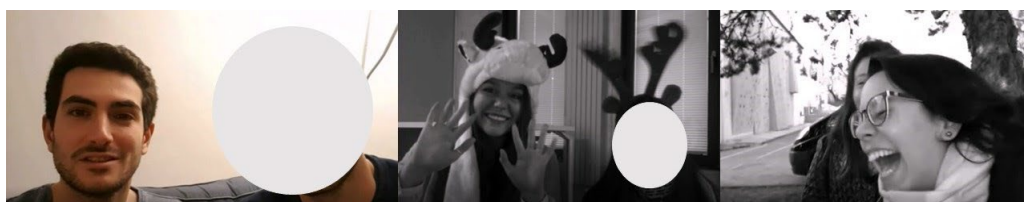

Figure 3. Screen captures of Alain, Carole, and Natacha's self-presentation videos

Reflecting on the process of making her self-presentation video with a peer, Carole wrote in her final paper:

> In order to hit on an original presentation idea that would make the UCB students want to work with us, we had to define our ethos. This definition was totally unconscious, and it was only once we thought back on it afterwards that we were able to really see what we did. [...] we incorporated a scenography that was both teacherly and friendly. [...] Teased by my friend for my love of moose, I decided to bring some props for our video. So we filmed a pretty funny scene that was halfway between a movie trailer and an advertisement. [...] we decided to have a "teacher" tone at the beginning, to introduce the project. Then, when we presented ourselves, we could see a less formal register, and when we talked about our personal interests, our facial expressions and gestures expressed a more familiar register. [our translation]

By adding a prop to her video, Carole is introducing humor in an attempt personalize the presentation. Yet, as Carole explains, the final product ends up blending genres, registers, and, we suggest, cultural references. "Between a movie trailer and an advertisement," the video is also characterized by "a teacher tone." Carole's comment here shows that she is adopting a particular role- that of a teacher- only to mediate a particular personal reference ['my love of moose'] across different genres. Yet the question remains whether such an image would indeed convey a purely personalized and playful reference with the students in the US, whose cultural references to a moose are not only entirely distinct but may not communicate individuality or even a positive image at all.

In the instructions they gave for the forum discussions, the Aix-Marseille Université students demonstrated a range of media literacy competences. For

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instance, the use of an avatar in order to personalize online exchanges was executed differently among the three AMU students (Figure 4). While Alain did not choose an avatar, Natacha opted for a screen grab from her self-presentation video, and Carole created a graphic avatar of her image for opening and closing greetings with her UCB partners. Out of the eight Berkeley students included in this study, only one used an avatar (Kim), opting to include a photograph of herself.

Figure 4. Screen captures of Natacha and Carole's avatars

All three AMU students demonstrated mastery of multimodal didactic discourse, present in their use of paragraphs, insertion of hyperlinks for the videoconferencing platform with the date and hour, as well as those for the documents to be consulted, and the use of color in order to facilitate the reading and work of the UCB students. Figure 5 shows one example of Carole's instructions for her Berkeley students.

Figure 5. Screen capture of an excerpt of Carole's instructions

The AMU teacher trainees' success in multimodal management facilitated real collaborative work with the UCB students. For example, during the third videoconference for the final writing task, Alain selected the "collaboration" configuration of the Adobe Connect platform and used a collective whiteboard to reformulate the UCB students' spoken co mments to make them consistent with the genre constraints of the charter they were developing orally (Figure 6).

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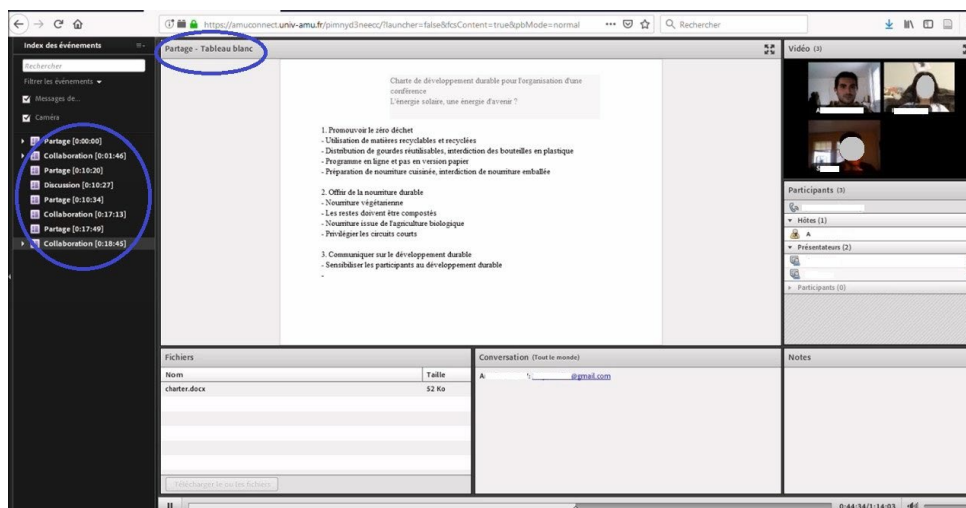
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Figure 6. Alain's multimodal dexterity and collaborative writing

Finally, the AMU students developed their pedagogical flexibility considerably over the course of the online sessions. They began the exchange not knowing much about the students except their general level of French (B1 +) and their French course syllabus. In addition, they sometimes had to change partners, have one or two depending on absences, adapt to the UCB LMS platform, do the third videoconference independently from their home after negotiating the schedule with their learner. As Carole wrote in her reflection paper at the end of the semester:

> We did this training without really knowing the participants and their level in French. We therefore planned to change certain instructions according to their level. In addition, we had doubts about the time we had available (45 minutes theoretically) and the time it would take to read and explain the three documents. [our translation]

Nevertheless, Carole found satisfaction in the moments that were unplanned and required spur-of-the-moment spontaneity, as when she was teaching a text and one of her UCB students asked her what her own opinion was about the text:

> I was not prepared for that, so I improvised my word choice and gave my real opinion. It turns out that I used words that were a little complicated, like "Israeli-Palestinian conflict," but the students seemed to really like the session. What's more, I noted that the two students had preferred this "discussion" part I had planned over the detailed teaching of the documents. [our translation]

From Carole's comment, it is noted that unplanned exchanges on cultural topics were "a little complicated" and they involved modification of vocabulary. While the comment suggests that the topic involved "improvisation" and hints at the complexity of communication, it ended up enabling particularly meaningful exchanges among the two groups. This

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example is evocative of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari for whom cultural transfer is the starting point for the production of new or transformed concepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994).

Conclusion

The project outcomes indicate that the AMU-UCB telecollaboration has been of clear mutual benefit. The UCB learners of French strengthened their critical thinking, communication skills and multimodal competences. They were able to identify, access, analyze, and synthesize relevant information on environmental topics and sustainable practices provided by their partners from AMU. They adopted a variety of standpoints toward environmental topics, which led them to re-examine their own daily practices and take on multiple perspectives toward them. Furthermore, students were able to analyze sources on the Internet, and interact in a multimodal platform and create, together with their AMU partners, a new charter on sustainable practices on the AMU campus. As a result, UCB students were able to make effective oral and written presentations and reflect analytically, taking purpose and audience into account.

Moreover, the UCB students strengthened their trans-lingual and transcultural skills (MLA 2007). In their written work, students applied concepts and research findings to evaluate sustainable practices in the French context and compare them to those present in UCB. Through the synchronous and asynchronous exchanges, learners of French were able to successfully explain ongoing environmental issues at UCB to their peers in France and discuss the impact of possible actions in real-world situations. Finally, the UCB students demonstrated an understanding of French environmental issues in relation to those of the US and were able to evaluate possible courses of action toward sustainable practices on individual, local and global levels.

As the AMU students worked with the UCB students, they progressively developed their tutorial personae. This, in combination with learning to critically analyze multimodal documents and to adapt and monitor their communication across the different online environments, contributed to their professional ethos and confidence in working with emergent digital genres.

Social action objectives were achieved by students' production of the proposed charter for AMU. The project also generated action on our part as teacher/researchers since certain objectives were accomplished, others not, and this pushed us to make changes in the way we managed the exchange a year later. The example of environmental sustainability has shown that the teacher trainees served as mediators of French culture to the American students. In the process, the range of themes addressed in the UCB intermediate French curriculum was broadened in accordance with students' own personal interests, allowing them to choose their own topics. In a subsequent iteration of the project, we increased the number of videoconferences and began preparing AMU students a semester earlier in another course to make it possible to dedicate more time to videoconferencing. We anticipate more cultural transfer and more co-creation of a shared culture taking place in future exchanges.

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