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German as a foreign language

Cultural Historical Learning in Virtual Worlds

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In this article, a research project is presented in which the potential of Virtual Worlds for historical and cultural learning are evaluated. This article presents current discussions concerning the idea of Landeskunde while utilising the socio-scientific idea of *spaces of memory*. The project aims to help learners explore the history of Germany, particularly the division of Germany and German Reunification. This article offers initial insight into the collected data and shows the potential as well as problems of cultural historical learning in Virtual Worlds.

1. Introduction

Landeskunde is considered an 'impossible subject' ("unmögliches Fach," cp. Gürttler/Steinfeld 1990: 250) and has been discussed intensely for more than twenty years in various articles. One reason may be that there is always a gap between those facts and traditions that are gathered about a country in language lessons and the actual feeling for a country's culture and way of life gathered through experience. The concept of *spaces of memory* is one of the latest trends in this discussion of *Landeskunde* that could help to bridge this gap. In addition, this concept offers an interesting way to utilise digital media for teaching *Landeskunde*.

There are numerous new concepts for teaching *Landeskunde* today, but they mostly ignore the advances made in digital media in the last few years. In language learning, the Internet is used mainly as a tool of communication, which can be seen in various e-mail projects. About fifteen years have passed since e-mail was introduced for the first time in classrooms (cf. Donath 1996). Not only have the possibilities for using multimedia developed enormously since then, but also student's communication habits. As Thorne (2003, 55ff) noticed, e-mail is seen by today's students as a formal means of communication with teachers, but not as a means to establish an amicable connection with exchange partners in another country. Students would rather communicate via Instant Messenger or through social networks (vgl. MPFS 2009: 34) – a fact that should be taken into consideration for initialising exchange projects. In addition, there are far more possibilities in today's online world than merely exchanging text messages.

Since being introduced amid much hype in 2007, Virtual Worlds have become a form of digital media discussed in public as well as in second language acquisition pedagogy (see Raith 2008; Stevens 2006; Peterson 2005, 2006). In fact, these articles concentrate on the instruction of language skills and how Virtual Worlds can be used in this context. In my opinion, the potential of Virtual Worlds for language learning lies in its rich environment. Examining the hypothesis that Virtual Worlds can encourage cultural and historical learning, this article will present the concept of a research project to verify this hypothesis.

First, recent developments in discussions about *Landeskunde* are discussed. This is followed by an introduction to Virtual Worlds, in order to connect the research project to the previous summary of *Landeskunde*. Focusing on one short sequence of data, the interaction of a bi-national tridem in a virtual space of memory is analysed with the aim of showing the potential and underlining the problems of Virtual Worlds for historical and cultural learning.

2. Cultural historical learning

The concept of *Landeskunde* in the discussion of German as a foreign language is contentious. Methodological questions aside, this discussion is very extensive and centres specifically on the content that should be taught.

This discrepancy also becomes apparent in the various terms for this field of German as a foreign language[1], which point to different priorities. For this reason, one cannot translate *Landeskunde* as "cultural learning," as the term *Landeskunde* covers further aspects. Depending on which aspect is emphasised most, the translation could vary between "cultural studies," "historical learning," "intercultural learning" and "area studies".

In the 1990s, the different emphasis on content and the methods by which to teach it were geared towards three big branches of *Landeskunde*. These are systematised by Pauldrach (see Pauldrach 1992): The first branch is *faktische Landeskunde*, which concentrated on the transfer of facts such as the political system or the history of a country. The second branch

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[1]   Besides 'Landeskunde', there are also the terms 'Deutschlandstudien', 'Deutschlandkunde', 'Deutschlandwissen', 'Landeswissenschaft', 'Landesstudien', 'Kulturstudien', 'Kultur-wissenschaft', 'Realienkunde'.

is *kommunikative Landeskunde*, which offers a curriculum of everyday life and concentrates on routine communication and themes one has to know if one wants to communicate in the country.

In conjunction with the fact that societies had become increasingly multicultural, the third branch, *interkulturelle Landeskunde*, aimed to provoke intercultural awareness. Using the concept of culture in *interkulturelle Landeskunde*, the concepts of culture and of 'intercultural' were also discussed. Willis J. Edmondson and Juliane House (1998) came to the conclusion that *interkulturell* has too many potential interpretations; there are numerous concepts including the adverb *interkulturell*[2], but they are not necessarily related to foreign language learning. Aside from the trend of *interkulturelle Landeskunde*, *interkulturell* seems to be a basic principle of learning, of communication and – particularly on this level – of language learning.

Adelheid Hu defends the concept of *interkulturelles Lernen*. She surmises that the problem in all these discussions – as Edmondson and House also argue – is that culture is seen as being related to national topics (Hu 1999: 296). Hu stresses that people have complex biographies and that, in an ethnic sense, cultures do not exist. Because of this, Hu proposes using a narrative-constructivist concept of culture. She stresses that reality is constructed by our cultural backgrounds. Hu concludes that when people exchange different cultural concepts and their values and norms, this dialogue can be regarded as *interkulturelle Kommunikation* (Hu 1999: 297f.). Claus Altmayer builds upon this theoretical work to advance this concept of culture. As will be seen later, Altmayer's work is basic for a number of concepts as well as for the research that will be discussed later, so that I will illustrate Altmayer's ideas here in detail.

Similar to Hu, one elementary assumption of Altmayer's argumentation is the epistemological idea that reality is always constructed, based on individual paradigms that are acquired through socialisation (cp. Altmayer 2006a: 51). Because of this, according to Altmayer, reality is always something individual. Altmayer argues that culture cannot be known by just learning the facts of a community, but appears in texts as well. The term

'text' is used very broadly here to refer to something that contains pictures, photographs and other media to transport meaning between people. For this reason, cultural learning takes place while reading these texts, and the reader needs knowledge about the cultural background of a text to be able to understand it.[3] The way in which texts are understood is related to principles that are based on the culture and the knowledge of the reader. Altmayer calls these principles *kulturelle Deutungsmuster*, cultural patterns of interpretation (see Altmayer 2004).[4] He stresses that these patterns do not just vary between nations, but that each community has its own cultural patterns of interpretation. The aggregate of all the cultural patterns of interpretation of a group forms its culture, so the concept of culture is not fixed for nations (cf. Altmayer 2006b: 187). As a member of a community, each person has different sets of cultural patterns of interpretation that he or she uses to understand messages. Each group has its own culture. Therefore, the different sets of cultural patterns of interpretation of an individual form his or her personal cultural background. Based on this theory, Critical Incidents do not necessarily occur just because people live in different countries. It is possible to share things with another person, such as a profession, for example. Having this in common, the interlocutors have one set of cultural patterns of interpretation they share with another (cf. Altmayer 2006c: 257). Referring to this set, they will construe a text in the same way. To identify cultural patterns of interpretation, Altmayer uses the method of text analysis (cf. Altmayer 2004: 169ff.). He employs different texts to clarify the background of central keywords, thereby demonstrating the implicit meanings the texts contain.

The problem with Altmayer's concept is how to carry this concept into language classes. His concept is very ambitious; the text analysis could be conducted by high school students,

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[2]   Like 'interkulturelles Lernen', 'interkulturelle Kommunikation', 'interkulturelle Kompetenz', 'interkulturelle Missverständnisse', 'interkulturelle Erziehung', 'interkulturelle Pädagogik' and 'interkulturelle Germanistik' (cp. Edmondson House 1998: 61f.).

[3]   This aspect has a long tradition in Intercultural Literary Studies, but Altmayer started an extensive discussion of this aspect of *Landeskunde*.

[4]   Following the term from the social sciences 'social patterns of interpretation' (= *gesellschaftliche Deutungsmuster*, this translation seems to capture the entire meaning of *kulturelle Deutungmuster*. Furthermore, Altmayer alludes to the empirical social research and adopts the term *Deutungsmuster* from Ulrich Oeverman (cf. Altmayer 2006b, 185 and 2006c, 254).

but not by an average pupil, and the question would still be how to how to proceed with the results in class.

As was stated above, *Landeskunde* has developed in language learning by moving in the direction of cultural studies. Today, there is no question that gaining knowledge about the historical background of a culture in order to understand a community's culture is crucial. Although there is no question that presenting historical facts is important (cf. ABCD-Thesen 1990: 136), there is a deficiency of teaching materials for historical topics (see Koreik 1995). Fornoff argues that teaching historical facts is not an end in itself, but that it is needed to understand the culture's present situation (cf. Fornoff 2009, 504.). According to this idea, another new concept of teaching *Landeskunde* is fairly interesting; namely the idea of using a concept from social sciences, *spaces of memory*, for *Landeskunde*. It connects Altmayer's concept of the individual construction of reality with historical topics.

Spaces of memory is a concept first created by Pierre Nora (see Nora 1984-1992). He suggests that the culture of a group is linked to some places that are a component part of this group. *Spaces of memory* are located aspects of the collective memory, a model created by Maurice Halbwachs (see Halbwachs 1985). According to Halbwachs, collective memory is a phenomenon that helps form groups, giving them an identity that is needed to distinguish them from other groups. In contrast to the collected memories that are unique to each individual, the collective memory consists of memories which were not consciously made by individuals, but which were mediated through narrations, rituals and symbols. One form of these symbols is the concept of *spaces of memory*. *Spaces of memory* are not separate elements but are an embodiment of a cultural aspect. The *spaces of memory* contain a meaning that is clear for those who share the collective memory of the community; the meanings were learnt through socialisation. Others must be taught this meaning (cf. Assmann 1999: 309). *Spaces of memory* are like bridges between the past and the present. By visiting and learning about these spaces, students get a feeling for the culture of the community. They also learn about the history of the place and the culture, but always in context to its relevance for the present. Some historical facts need to be taught because they offer explanations about the values and characteristics of a culture (cf. Fornoff 2009: 504). Sabine and Karin Schmidt took this concept of *spaces of memory* and developed a textbook that integrates other material, like films, for cultural historical

learning (see Schmidt and Schmidt 2007). One can say that via this concept, a model was built to combine historical and cultural learning. In the following discussion, the term cultural historical learning will be used to denote this concept.

Teaching in Virtual Worlds seems to be very interesting with regard to this concept of establishing contact with the culture of a community by visiting *spaces of memory*. In Virtual Worlds, people can get an impression of some *spaces of memory* that are rebuilt in a virtual environment. This environment will be presented below. Afterwards, the idea of cultural historical learning in Virtual Worlds will be outlined.

3. Virtual Worlds

Virtual Worlds are software-based platforms on the Internet. The most popular and also largest Virtual World is Second Life, which attained a high profile in 2007 with broad discussions about having a second life online. In contrast to online games, Virtual Worlds have no story or aim and the user is utterly free to do whatever he or she wants to do. Each user is represented by an avatar – a virtual figure the user can design himself. Gender, hair, size, clothes and colour – everything is modifiable. There are even avatars created as fantasy figures, such as dragons, animals or fairies. Second Life is used by most of its users as a new kind of chat tool, in which communication with others is the central issue (see Raith 2008, 10). There are several possibilities of communication. There is a public chat in which the user can type anything, and each user is able to read it if his avatar is standing near the other user's avatar. The same principle applies to voice chats, too. The user just pushes a button, speaks into a microphone and the others can hear his voice through the avatar. In addition to the public chat, there is a private chat for communication between two avatars. If the user is not online, the text-based chat will send the message the next time the user is online. In Second Life, groups are founded on different interests such as languages, careers or hobbies, and the groups communicate through a forum.

The Second Life software delivers the space; what the user does in this Virtual World is up to him/her. Even the environment is designed by users. Anyone can rent a part of the virtual land and build whatever he wants to there – limits are set only by fantasy. In addition to some free created environments, there are also replicas of real places. Metropolises all over

the world can be found in Second Life, and some museums have virtual exhibitions in Second Life. There are also companies or educational institutes using Virtual Worlds. Companies have islands to promote goods they would like to sell in the real world. In order to achieve this, they create virtual goods for the avatars. More than 170 educational institutions are represented in Second Life (cf. De Freitas 2008: 4). In the United States, there are several universities that use Second Life and have virtual campuses. Some German universities have followed this trend.[5] Most universities have several projects in Second Life or use their buildings there to offer information about the universities, but some hold lectures in Second Life that anyone can visit. Bielefeld and Duisburg-Essen have more complex environments which are regularly used for courses (see Ojstersek& Kerres, 2008; Walber & Schäffer 2010).

This leads to another way of using Second Life. Since it is not fixed in time and space, Second Life is also a great tool for international conferences. The participants do not have to travel and everyone can take part from his home or office. Compared to web conferencing tools like 'Adobe Connect', the participants feel like they are all in one area because they see the avatars together in the same auditorium. This leads to a feeling of being more integrated in the conference (cf. Nattland 2008: 9). While the speaker holds his lecture through the voice chat, participants can use the text chat to ask questions.

4. Virtual Worlds in foreign language learning

Virtual Worlds deliver interesting benefits for language learning. The learners interact with their avatars. It is a more playful way to use the foreign language and the whole design of Second Life is similar to computer games. Because of that, the learners are bolder with their language skills and show more of a desire in communicating with others. Michael Lange also ascertains that adolescents feel freer in Virtual Worlds to make contact with others (cp. Lange 2008: 256). Unfortunately, Lange does not explain how he determined

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[5] The universities of the following German cities have an environment in Second Life (in alphabetical order): Bielefeld, Braunschweig, Darmstadt, Duale Hochschule Baden-Würtemberg, Duisburg-Essen, Düsseldorf, Essling, Karlsruhe (Berufsakademie) Konstanz, Köln, Neubrandenburg, Stuttgart, Tübingen, Ulm, Weimar, Wissmar.

this using his data.[6] These 'others' can be German natives who can be found in German cities or groups, but also learners from all over the world. There are courses to learn languages as well. For example, the Goethe Institute has an island on which the programmes of Goethe Institutes all over the world are on offer. A free course for learners takes place and free oral lessons are held almost daily. Here, up to fifteen people from all over the world meet with a native tutor to practise German and to talk about recent or intercultural topics (see Biebighäuser and Marques-Schäfer 2009).

To use Second Life, the learner needs a fast Internet connection as well as a computer that is up to date and equipped with a microphone. In a second step, the learner has to learn how to move in the Virtual World. When starting out, it demands a lot of concentration and can take up a large part of a learner's attention.

Apart from experimentation with language, Second Life delivers other benefits with its ability to create environments. Plays can be put on in Second Life by taking over existing stages, which can then be used to stage dramas with the avatars of the learners. There are public performances of classical plays that can be visited by classes of learners. For example, the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre exists within Second Life and a group of avatars perform several Shakespearean dramas there.

But the virtual environment can be used for things other than plays as well. I consider one of the biggest potentials of Second Life to be the possibility of showing famous international places to people who cannot go there. Using this opportunity, Virtual Worlds can help in teaching the history and culture of a country.

5. How to use Second Life for historical cultural learning – The research project

Based on the finding that cultural topics can be better memorised if the learners can establish a personal relationship with them, (cf. Tamme 2001: 136) and connecting this finding to the concept of *spaces of memory* (see Nora 1998 and Halbwachs 2003), which

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[6] In his article, Lange summarises: "Kinder und Jugendliche nutzen diese ‚halb'-anonymen Räume im Internet, um ihr Verhalten mit anderen ausprobieren zu können. In Onlinewelten fällt es ungleich leichter, auf andere zuzugehen" (Lange 2008: 256).

has already been used for cultural learning by Schmidt and Schmidt (see Schmidt & Schmidt 2007), a Virtual World seems to be an ideal place for cultural learning. The aim of the research project that will be presented in this chapter is to prove this assumption.

5.1 Research questions and hypothesis

I maintain that, in Virtual Worlds, the learners explore historical facts and culture on their own (or through their avatars). In this way, they develop a strong connection to the topics and retain them in memory. In addition, Virtual Worlds are full of replicas of real places, which are important for the culture and self-concept of a nation. Based on this potential in Second Life, the following hypotheses were made and must be proved by the results of the project:

1) The learners' multi-modal ways of exploring information motivates them to deal with historical themes; the subjects are remembered because of the multi-modal representation.

2) Meetings in the Virtual World and the embodiment of partners via avatars influence the motivation and positive bonding of the learners with their partners.

3) By exploring the topics on their own and with learners from different cultural backgrounds, the learners find a platform in which they can realise the importance of their schemes[7] of cultural interpretation.

5.2 Research setting

In order to analyse the potential – and at the same time the problems – in using Virtual Worlds for cultural learning, a research project was initiated at the Justus Liebig University in Gießen (Germany).[8] In cooperation with the teacher training college in Wroclaw (Poland), tandems and tridems were formed and consisted of students learning German as a foreign language from both universities. The students in Gießen were native speakers, together with students from other countries (such as China and Russia) who were spending

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[7] In the discussion of memory, schemes are a concept that describes the generalisation of something new in order to classify it and connect it to the body of knowledge.

[8] This project is a sub-project of the project "Kulturtechniken und ihre Medialisierung", financed by the Hessian Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts in the research promotion

a semester abroad in Gießen. The data collection was held in November and December 2009 and consisted of four meetings of each tandem/tridem in Second Life, once a week. Each week they were supposed to visit different places and were given a different task to complete. Before meeting in Second Life, the tandems and tridems were asked to write an e-mail to their team members so that they would already know a little about each other when they met. Since none of the students had any experiences with Second Life, there was a whole-day workshop for the students in Gießen to get to know the programme. In Poland, the teacher was asked to also give them an introduction. In addition, an introductory environment of Second Life was offered to the students in Gießen as well as in Wroclaw, so that the students could learn to explore Second Life on their own. Unfortunately, the Polish students only had a few minutes of instruction from their teacher before the first meeting was held.

The first meeting in Second Life was about getting to know each other and the Virtual World. The next two weeks were spent exploring places in Second Life that dealt with the division of Germany and German Reunification. This meant visiting two exhibitions based on and located at the Berlin Wall during the second week. During the third week, the students visited a virtual part of Berlin – built on the model of the DDR-Museum Berlin – in Second Life. It showed a part of East Berlin in 1976. In addition, the groups had to prepare a presentation comparing life in the two parts of Germany with life in their home countries.

5.3 Research methods

When conducting the initial research on cultural learning in Virtual Worlds, the hypotheses stated above are very broad and intuitive and are a result of the research dealing with *Landeskunde* in other forms of media like e-mail exchanges. Another important aspect to mention is that this research project is qualitative, so that there is no verification in the sense of quantitative research. The hypotheses can only be regarded as more or less correct by interpreting different data.

The tandems and tridems were captured by using screen-capture software. The learners had learning diaries in which they wrote their impressions and appraisals directly after each meeting and notes were made by the supervisor. In addition, there were questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the project to explore views on historical themes in general and the German Democratic Republic in particular, as well as questions about their computer skills. At the end, the learners were asked to comment on the work in Second Life, the work in the tandems and the places visited. As a first insight into these data, the results of one meeting will be shown here and analysed in detail.

5.4 Excerpt of data

Below, one sequence of data is shown in detail. Showing this sequence will help in analysing it in the next step. But in addition to this, I suppose that, because Virtual Worlds are a new form of media, most readers have no experience with data from Second Life. Showing this sequence in detail will also give an impression of Virtual Worlds.

The sequence shows a chat between three girls. Sonnenblume (age 23) and Pusteblume (age 22) are German, Paulina (age 21) is Polish. They visit a virtual exhibition dealing with the Berlin Wall. The interesting point concerning this exhibition is that the information boards are put on a virtual Berlin Wall. The visitors walk between the Wall and a barbed wire fence. Unfortunately, the text on the boards is written in English. So the students have to read the information in a different language than the one they use in conversation. The task given to the group was very open. They were required to walk through this exhibition and talk about the things they see.

Illustration 1: The tridem visiting an exhibition on the Wall. The fourth avatar, EvaMaria Deutsch, is the teacher who was there to give technical advice, but did not influence the chat.[9]

Since the Polish student had problems with her voice chat, the group decided to use the text chat. The protocol given below is the original text chat used, including mistakes made by the students.

> [2009/11/18 8:27] pusteblume Evanier: paulina, weißt du denn schon ein paar sachen zum thema ddr und mauerfall etc.?
> [2009/11/18 8:27] Paulina Ranimodo: eigentlich nicht
> [2009/11/18 8:28] Sonnenblume Bulmer: die mauer wurde durc
> [2009/11/18 8:28] Sonnenblume Bulmer: h berlin gezogen... berlin kennst du sicherlich
> [2009/11/18 8:28] Paulina Ranimodo: ja
> [2009/11/18 8:28] Sonnenblume Bulmer: das war von 1961-1989 geteilt
> [2009/11/18 8:28] Sonnenblume Bulmer: in : ost-Berlin und West-Berlin
> [2009/11/18 8:28] Paulina Ranimodo: also zwei Teile
> [2009/11/18 8:29] pusteblume Evanier: kann man auch dort auf dem schild lessen
> [2009/11/18 8:29] pusteblume Evanier: wo du grade standest

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9   The titles in front of the avatars' names are the result of membership in a group and they change depending on which group is chosen to be the main one, or the avatar becomes a member of the latest group. Becoming a member of a group was necessary to enter the area of the DDR Museum. Because of this, the avatars are titled "Genosse" or "Visum DDR".

[2009/11/18 8:29] Sonnenblume Bulmer: genau und die menschen konnten nicht auf die andere seite berlins gehen..
[2009/11/18 8:29] Paulina Ranimodo: das weiß ich
[2009/11/18 8:29] Sonnenblume Bulmer: die tafel die du dir gerade ansiehst
[2009/11/18 8:29] Paulina Ranimodo: eine seite war arm und eine reicher
[2009/11/18 8:29] Sonnenblume Bulmer: unten links ist das brandenburger tor
[2009/11/18 8:30] Paulina Ranimodo: ja
[2009/11/18 8:30] Paulina Ranimodo: hier sehe ich berliner mauer
[2009/11/18 8:31] Sonnenblume Bulmer: genau und ich habe gerad gelesen, dass sie 140 kilometer lang war

The protocol contains a five-minute-long chat. Eighteen messages were sent in this period. Compared to other text chats in this research project, this is very little conversation. Groups which used the voice chat in this situation tended to talk more and to make longer contributions. However, they also did not talk as much as in other situations, such as during the first meeting where they got to know each other. Less conversation can be explained by the fact that the students had to read the information boards and look at the pictures, meaning that they were concentrating on these media and not as much on their tridem partners.

5.5 First results

It is worth noting that the two German girls see themselves in a more input-giving role to their Polish partner. It seems as if Pusteblume and Sonnenblume behave in accordance with the trend of factual *Landeskunde*. According to this concept, the teacher offers a lot of factual input about the topic to the students. In factual *Landeskunde*, there is not much discussion about the themes; it seems as if there is one truth that the students digest. Sonnenblume and Pusteblume behave in this way. They consider themselves to be experts, as they come from Germany and have recently talked about the GDR in the seminar. As a result, there is not much discussion but an exchange of factual knowledge between the girls. Their discussion about the exhibition starts with asking Paulina if she knows anything about the GDR. They use only small letters. This is common in native chatrooms in order to be able to write faster. Paulina does the same. At the very beginning of their trip, the two German girls give a lot of factual input about the Wall. The girls had not yet read the information boards, but start by relating facts about the Berlin Wall. They do this voluntarily, instead of having a brief discussion about the place or anything else. Sonnenblume and Pusteblume show that they know some facts about the Berlin Wall and

give Paulina a good introduction to the topic. They explain the most important facts about the Berlin Wall: where it was built, the period in which it stood and the central consequences of its construction. Although these facts are somewhat superficial, all the information given is correct and they are self-motivated. Whilst sharing this information, the conversation is dominated by the German girls. Paulina asks additional questions and presents the assumptions she has about the two parts of Germany ("eine seite war arm und eine reicher"). This assumption is quite superficial, too, but neither of the others notice it and correct it. Here it can be seen that during the whole conversation the girls concentrate on giving information. Yet, after having given this information, the chat continues to focus on other facts about the Berlin Wall. They do not come to the point of talking about how living with the Berlin Wall must have been, although they are in an environment that could provoke such a discussion.

There is no doubt that the Berlin Wall accords with the concept of a space of memory. It stands for the separation of a nation, for two different political systems clashing in Berlin. With the fall of the Wall, the Cold War came to an end. Because of this, the Wall does not stand for itself, but represents the whole political situation of the Cold War. Thus, it is not just a space of memory for the Germans, but for an era. It is to be assumed that the Berlin Wall is a space of memory for Poles, too. Poland was integrated in the Soviet sphere of control. Being a neighbour of Germany (and, in the past, of the GDR), this part of German history is rather close to Polish culture.

In any case, the tridem merely touched the surface of the topic and discussed it on a very factual and superficial level. The likely reason for this is the Virtual World. The girls are occupied with the whole online environment, navigating their avatars and reading the given information.

Perhaps because Paulina says that she does not know much about the GDR and German history, the girls continue talking about the facts and do not enter more deeply into the topic. One important aspect is the kind of task, too. The task was open-ended and allowed the group to set their focus on the things they considered to be important. Being confronted with the Virtual World, the other group members and the historical background, one may assume that they were overwhelmed by such an open task.

The scene shown in this article makes it clear that learning in Virtual Worlds requires more guidance by the teacher, especially when the students are not experienced in working with the media and when there is a lot of information delivered via the environment.

Besides this aspect of learning in Virtual Worlds, the effect of the environment on the relationship between the tandems and tridems was quite positive. It was remarkable that the tandems and tridems made connections with each other very quickly. This is an aspect the students recognized themselves; a lot of feedback was given on how quickly familiarity arose between them. There was no shyness on the part of any students. They were motivated to exchange their knowledge concerning the topic given in the Virtual Worlds. For example, there was very active communication even in the first group meetings. All fourteen groups talked to each other for between 30 and 45 minutes to get to know the team members better. There was no time frame given, except that it was known that some groups were followed by the meeting of another group an hour later.

6. Summary and perspectives

Virtual Worlds are an interesting place to come into contact with people or places far away from one's home. If one does not have the chance to visit a place in the real world, a trip to a virtual replica location can be extremely interesting. Compared to a picture, a virtual place can be walked through and the three-dimensional construction makes the impression more vivid and closer.

For learning contexts, Virtual Worlds seem to motivate the learners to talk to each other. The tandems and tridems made connections with each other very quickly and looked forward to each meeting they had. For working together, this atmosphere helped them very much: they communicated very openly and students from abroad did not hesitate to use the foreign language. Given open tasks, the students became interested in exploring the Virtual World together.

However, it also became clear that in such an ambitious learning environment, the students seem to need very strong guidance to profit from the potential of the environment. The open tasks given in this example led to a conversation about the topic, but this was kept at a very superficial level. The facts presented were correct, but they did not help to

communicate a feeling of the situation in East Germany. This need for more guidance could be fulfilled by setting a more precise task for the students. It is important to lead them more clearly through the virtual environments, showing them the most important or remarkable things. The teacher should also be more integrated in the conversations. He or she should moderate the conversation and intervene if wrong assumptions are made. When the students talk about culture, the teacher could ask questions which lead to deeper consideration from the point of view of the partner.

As mentioned earlier, this research project is very explorative, as it is the first one to deal with the virtual environment for cultural historical learning. These data were a first chance to get an impression of how groups of students behave and interact in Virtual Worlds. It became clear that exploring the rich environment and the embedded information, as well as navigating through the Virtual World, are two tasks that compete with the conversation occurring in the group. In the future, similar attempts should be made in order to check if more guidance will lead to deeper conversations about the topics. This will show if *spaces of memory* in Virtual Worlds lead to more intense and vivid discussions about the cultural patterns of interpretation that each participant has concerning these *spaces of memory*.

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