Towards sustainable virtual exchange

Daniela Caluianu

Not long ago, I was watching a 1967 film portraying a home of the future. The 'future' was the year 1999 and the technology, intended to look futuristic, appeared to me antiquated, slow and clunky. Clearly, the progress made at the turn of the millennium has been so sudden and radical that it went beyond the limits of human imagination. Yet, in our universities, the way we teach is not very different from the way classes were taught one hundred years ago. This is not for lack of options or because change is not necessary. A well-rounded person living in the 21st century will need, on top of their domain specific knowledge, a set of skills her parents and grandparents did not have much use for: intercultural communicative competence, digital literacy, dialogue facilitation skills.

As technology and globalization bring us closer to people all around the world, these new skills are becoming a must not only for a chosen few but for the large majority of the work force: working in Global Virtual Teams is becoming common practice (Connaughton& Shuffler, 2007: Ebrahim et al, 2009; Goettsch, 2006) and the ability to interact with a computer makes itself felt at every turn: from managing your payments to conducting a job interview successfully (BBC News). Recent advances made in electronic communications give us the means to teach the skills needed to survive in the 21st century. What we have to do is acknowledge the need and adapt to the times. In this article I will discuss an educational practice that can help foster these new skills, namely virtual exchange, and I will offer a brief sketch of how sustainable virtual exchange can be implemented.

Virtual exchange

Virtual Exchange (VE), or telecollaboration, is a pedagogical practice in which learners in geographically dispersed locations carry out collaborative tasks using electronic means of communication. VE is gaining recognition around the world (Caluianu 2018) and is being promoted with particular zeal in Europe where the European Commission is actively supporting the practice through large-scale projects such as   EVOLVE (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange) and EVALUATE (Evaluating and Upscaling Telecollaborative Teacher Education.) The EVOLVE project site outlines the standard for successful VE by providing a list of defining characteristics of the practice. The list is quoted in (1) below.

 (1) What is Virtual Exchange
- Sustained: unfolding over time with regular, intensive interaction;
- Technology-enabled: using new media, digital, and/or mobile technologies;

- Preferably based on regular synchronous or near-synchronous meetings using high social presence media;
- People-to-people: involving inclusive, intercultural collaboration and dialogue, that bridges differences and distances and inspires action with a long term positive impact on relationships;
- Learner-led: following the philosophy of dialogue where participants are the main recipients and the main drivers of knowledge; learning through dialogue means that participants will be seeking mutual understanding and co-creating knowledge, based on their own experiences.
- Facilitated: with the support of trained facilitators and/or educators;
- Educational: Integrated into formal and/or non-formal educational programmes and activities to develop measurable increases in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that foster pro-social behaviours;
- Structured to foster mutual understanding: covering topics related to identity, empathy, perspective taking, critical reflection, intercultural understanding, and helping participants to engage in constructive conversations in the face of ontological and epistemological differences; a key tenet of VE is that intercultural understanding and awareness are not automatic outcomes of contact between different groups/cultures.

The site also offers a cautionary list of the activities that might be confused with VE but which are not VE.

(2) What is NOT Virtual Exchange
- Simple MOOCS with no sustained interactions between small groups of students;
- Distance learning courses;
- Creating social media groups;
- Unmoderated, unsustained, unstructured programs;
- Virtual mobility which is closer to distance online education: that is 'studying abroad' at another institution without having to go there and making claims to intercultural learning purely through being 'cross-border';
- Programs that lack a sustained pedagogy for interaction, such as programs with only one moment for interaction, like a one-off meeting.

As can be seen from (1) and (2) above, one of the most important characteristics of successful VE is sustainability. To count as Virtual Exchange, a collaboration must involve long-term, intensive, well-structured interaction rather than short-term, ad-hoc exchanges. Maintaining regular, intensive interaction, however, is a difficult task that becomes more challenging as the distance-both physical and cultural- between the partners grows. Helm (2015) reports, based on data collected from 210 university language teachers at 23 universities across Europe, that the main reasons quoted by educators for not using telecollaboration in their classes are lack of

time, technical difficulties and 'great uncertainty regarding issues students should address in their exchanges'. The following section will discuss two VE projects implemented at OUC and argue, based on a comparison between the two, that successful VE can be organized without putting excessive burden on the time of the educator and in the absence of outstanding technical skills.

The projects

The first VE project discussed here was carried out at OUC in collaboration with Transylvania University of Brasov, Romania, during the 2nd semester of the academic year 2015-16. The project was integrated with the curriculum of an OUC academic writing class (English Composition 1) and included a variety of synchronous and asynchronous activities. Practically every lecture in the course was connected with a Virtual activity. The OUC students had ample opportunity to exchange ideas with their Romanian partners during in-class video-conferencing sessions, they shared their work online and engaged in peer reviewing. The complete list of activities is given in (3). For more details and comments, see Caluianu (2018).

(3) OUC-TUB Project 2015

Project 1
General goal: Give students tools needed for writing a graduation paper in English
Desired outcomes: increased motivation; authenticity; self-awareness

Unit 1: From presentation to essay
Unit goals: descriptive/ expository essay; spoken vs written language

Activity	Medium	Type &Location
Introductions	Video conferencing	Synchronous; In class
Presentation: My University	PowerPoint	Asynchronous; shared online
Q&A on presentations	Video conferencing	Synchronous; In class
Essay: Your university	Google docs	Asynchronous; shared online
Peer review	**Google docs**	**Asynchronous; shared online**

Unit 2: From survey to report
Unit goals: data collection and report writing

Activity	Medium	Location
Survey making	Video conferencing	Synchronous; In class
Data collection	Google forms	Asynchronous; homework
Data analysis& report	Google docs	Asynchronous; shared online
Peer review	**Google docs**	**Asynchronous; shared online**

Unit 3: From reading to article review
Unit goals: summarizing, opinion writing

Activity	Medium	Location
Reading		Asynchronous; homework
Article discussion	Video conferencing	Synchronous; In class
Article review	Google docs	Asynchronous; shared online
Peer review	**Google docs**	**Asynchronous; shared online**

The project can be described as a mixed success: all the activities were completed according to plan. Doing this, however, involved high costs. The project was time-consuming, it required the assistance of technical staff, it put so much stress on the Romanian partners that, at the end of the year, the instructor withdrew from the collaboration. In short, it was not a sustainable enterprise and, in spite of many positive elements, was in need of change. On the way in which the project evolved over the years, see Caluianu (2018, 2019).

The second project, having as partner the Silesian University of Technology of Gliwice, Poland (SUT), is summarized in figure (4). Project 2 was more compact than Project 1- instead of spreading throughout the semester, it was completed in six weeks. In contrast with Project 1, which boasted a large number of synchronous activities, the balance was tipped for this project in favor of asynchronous exchanges. Most of the collaborative activities were pursued outside class, and, most importantly, a considerably higher amount of time was set aside for reflection.

(4) OUC- SUT Project 2018

Project 2
General goal: Give students tools needed for writing a graduation paper in English
Desired outcomes: increased motivation; authenticity; self-awareness

Activity	Medium	Type& Location	Other
Introductions	Padlet	Asynchronous; home	
Q&A: Your country	Padlet	Asynchronous; home	Essay 1: expectations
Make groups& choose topic	free	???; home	
Exchange information	free	???; home	3 weeks
Create product	Article Blog	Asynchronous; home	In class discussion
Goodbyes	Padlet video	Asynchronous; ???	Essay 2: Your partners
Survey	Google forms/ ???	Asynchronous; home	

The second project was different from the first in important ways, the most consequential of which was instructor experience. At the start of the OUC-TUB project (Project 1) neither of the two instructors involved was aware that the practice of using digital communication tools to conduct collaborative activities with students on different hemispheres had a name, telecollaboration or VE, that numerous educators around the world had already tried it and that there was advice available on how to make the most of it. Consequently, we reinvented the wheel by designing our project from scratch with no outside input. Hence the imperfections of the project detailed in Caluianu (2019). For the second project, on the other hand, both partners had some experience with telecollaboration and this helped us avoid some rookie mistakes such as over-burdening and micromanaging the students. The last two points were decisive for the success of the project.

The students involved in Project 2 were allowed far more agency than those from Project 1 where the teacher was in control at every stage of the exchange. After the icebreaking activities carried out under instructor supervision, the participants in Project 2 took charge of the exchange. Their task was to collect the information needed to create a product, an article or a blog, on a cultural topic decided through negotiation with their partners. It was their responsibility to contact the overseas partners, choose a topic together, ask questions in order to collect the material needed to complete their task and answer questions from their partners in a timely fashion. In doing this, they met with a wide range of obstacles and had to work around them.

The time difference between the two countries caused the most obvious difficulties. Asked which had been the most frustrating thing about the collaboration, seven out of 13 Japanese respondents named time differences.

In my opinion, it is one of the reasons of the causing these difficulties is that there are time differences between Japan and Poland. Usually, when I sent a reply, the time of another country was midnight and so on, so it was difficult for both students to get and give responses at the time when they and the partner wanted. Also, we are busy doing other thing. For instance, homework, exams and part-time job and so on. It is because that we are college students. Of course, no one can engage in this project all day. Therefore, the speed of responses is not be able to be helped, but what we could do if we try to improve it. The reason why we could not improve them because our motivation for this projects are gradually decreasing by the late response from both students. Therefore, it is necessary that to considering the time differences between two countries when to start the telecollaboration.

Difficulty in aligning schedules and setting up a video conference caused additional frustration, but also engendered critical self-reflection.

The exchange only on the internet was not good, we should have managed to make a video chatting at least once. However, this idea that face to face conversation is quite important would not arise without this experience. I believe I have to study English more in order not to waste this regret.

By allowing more time for reflection, the participants had the opportunity to become aware of the significance of the various activities and of the benefits of the project. Frustrating episodes, miscommunication, failure to obtain the required information on time, surprising and confusing behaviors were reconsidered and seen in their true light as differences in communicative style and cultural norms.

Through these processes, I found some communication differences. Japanese students is more passive than Polish students, and Polish students is more active than Japanese students. For example, when we want to get information, Japanese student hesitate to press the

Polish students for replying. Japanese students think too much about what the Polish students feel like. On the other hand, the Polish students do not. It is natural, this is because they need the information too. The Japanese students should be more active too.

The lack of time for reflection was one of the main failures of Project 1- too little time was devoted to analyzing and discussing the experience gained through the project and the copious amount of information collected. Although, in their feedback on the exchange, the participants were very laudatory and mentioned gains in intercultural communicative competence, those claims were vague and conventional. They appear to reflect more what was expected than what was actually experienced.

I think this class was more effective at the point of knowing different cultures and communicating with foreign people.

I could hear opinions from other people in a different country.

By contrast, the participants in Project 2 offered very specific observations on cultural differences indicating that the intercultural experience had been genuine and consequential as illustrated in the comments below.

A. Polish students are passive and optimistic. They don't ask Japanese students a lot of questions, and some Polish students don't refer to what they don't know. What's more, they regard the telecollaboration project as an enjoyable activity in comparison to Japanese students. For example, they use a lot of emoji and sometimes tell a jokes. They don't care about cooperation and attention, either. Only one person asks and answers the questions. In addition, they often make spelling mistakes, so it is difficult for Japanese students to understand what Polish students want to say.

In contrast, Japanese students are very strict. If they cannot answer the question, they gather information and try to answer correctly. What's more, they write a text like an essay, so it is not interesting. However, it means that they want Polish students to know Japanese culture exactly, and they respect Polish students. In fact, the behavior of the Japanese students shows that they are considerate of others. For example, they cooperate with members of the same team, and ask and answer the question alternately. In addition, they pay attention to spelling and grammar, so it is easy to understand what they want to say.

Personalities of Polish students and Japanese students are completely opposite. Either personality should be respected, because there are a lot of ideas in the world.

The exchange prompted self-awareness as illustrated in Student B's observations and it provided stimulus to pursue cross-cultural learning beyond the current exchange as suggested in Student C's comments:

B. Another thing I thought about Polish is that Polish students knew their culture well. I sometimes got upset when Polish students asked me cultural things especially based on religious thought, because I wasn't sure meaning of the events, but Polish students always gave me clear information and also links for websites. I thought I had to learn about our own culture more.

C .The culture I could learn through the project is of course not a perfect and not a lot enough to understand Poland, however I could get in touch with people actually living in Poland and ask them a lot of questions. This experience is really fruitful and it motivated me to learn other countries' culture and our own culture more.

The attitudes reflected in the quotes above were shaped over a number of weeks and could be articulated only because the participants were given time for reflection and were prompted to analyze their experience in an objective manner. The Japanese participants in the project had to submit an essay in which they described the project in detail and commented on it.

Conclusion

As the brief description of the two projects suggests, Project 2 was more successful than Project 1. This is in spite of the fact that considerably more time, energy and technical know-how were invested in Project 1. This state of affairs bodes well for the future of virtual exchange- suggesting that sustainable virtual exchange can be conducted without great sacrifice of time or expert technical knowledge on the part of the practitioner.

The success or failure of a virtual exchange project depends on a large number of factors: learners, educators, institutions, technology, geographical and temporal distance, to mention only a few, and it is impossible to draw any general conclusions on the basis of a single case. However, the comparative success of Project 2 suggests a few, tentative conclusions.

Technological expertise is not essential. Although the requirement that virtual exchange should be based on constant synchronous or near-synchronous online communications is justified- synchronous exchanges make communication more authentic and are more motivating- it is not absolute. Greater gains in intercultural communication skills can be achieved through a judicious combination of lower online presence interaction and reflection than through intensive, synchronous exchanges.

Although Project 1 boasted monthly, in-class synchronous exchanges combined with weekly asynchronous communications, it offered limited chances to test and develop the learners' intercultural communication skills. In Project 2, the only technology used by the instructor was Padlet, an easy-to-use platform. All the exchanges were outside class and conducted by the learners themselves. With one exception, the exchanges were in text form and asynchronous. In spite of this, they yielded valuable cultural experience.

Organizing a virtual exchange does not have to be a time-consuming activity. Paradoxically, the main obstacle to authentic communication in Project 1 was the excessively good organization of the exchanges. The teacher's time-consuming effort proved to be the downfall of the

enterprise. Every detail of the project was considered beforehand and coordinated by the instructors, leaving no room for failure. As a result, there were few challenges or surprises that would force the learners out of their cultural or linguistic comfort zone. No need for negotiating skills, no chance to test one's intercultural sensitivity, no time for reflection. This was not the case for Project 2, where there was plenty of room for learner agency. And this is the final advice to future practitioners: **encourage student agency**. In Project 2, the learners had to rely on their wits in order to cope with unfamiliar and, sometimes, uncomfortable situations. Although these critical incidents were initially perceived as disagreeable, once they were in the past, they were reclassified as valuable experience. It is only fitting to conclude this article by quoting one of the learners:

We were satisfied with this project. This experience led me to develop myself. At first, I had some troubles but I thought communicating with foreigners is very interesting. I can learn other cultures and Japanese cultures well. In addition, my English skill can improve. Thus I want to join telecollaboration in the future.

References

BBC News. 2019. Could you do a video interview for your next job? Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/av/business-48803515/could-you-do-a-video-interview-for-your-next-job

Caluianu, Daniela. 2018. Telecollaboration: Foreign Language Education in the Digital Age.『小樽商科大学人文研究』135. 49-74

Caluianu, Daniela. 2019. When more is less: unexpected challenges and benefits of telecollaboration. In A. Turula, M. Kurek & T. Lewis (Eds), *Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship* (pp. 7-13). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.35.934

Connaughton, S. L., & Shuffler, M. (2007). Multinational and multicultural distributed teams: A review and future agenda. *Small Group Research, 38*(3), 387-412. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1046496407301970

Ebrahim, Nader Ale, Shamsuddin Ahmed and Zahari Taha. 2009. Virtual Teams: A Literature Review, *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 2653-2669, 2009. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=1501443

EVOLVE (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange) https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/

Goettsch, Karin L. (2016) "Working with Global Virtual Teams: A Case Study Reality Check on Intercultural Communication Best Practices," *Global Advances in Business and Communications Conference & Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Helm, F. (2015). The practices and challenges of telecollaboration in higher education in Europe. *Language Learning & Technology, 19*(2), 197–217. Retrieved from http://llt.msu.edu/issues/june2015/helm.pdf

Helm, F. and Bart van der Velden (2019) Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2018, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union,

O'Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: state-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange, 1*, 1-23. Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.1

O'Dowd, R. and Waire, P.(2009)'Critical issues in telecollaborative task design',*Computer Assisted Language Learning*,22:2,173 — 188