

Telecollaboration: Creating International Bridges in Socially Distanced Times

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Abstract

Since it emerged in the 1990s, telecollaboration has evolved from being the reserve of linguists and language educators to a more broadly applicable approach that can be used in diverse academic contexts. Web 2 technologies have been used to transform learning spaces, by creating dynamic communication channels and authentic interaction. This project report describes a recent transnational exchange project (TEP). The TEP created a much-needed alternative to Erasmus mobility for students whose year abroad was abruptly aborted in March 2020, effectively harnessing Web 2 technologies to create social presence in socially distanced times.

Keywords: Telecollaboration, social presence, Web 2 technologies.

Introduction and Context

Originally conceived of in the 1990s by language teachers for the purpose of creating authentic communication channels for second language acquisition, telecollaboration has evolved into an all-encompassing multifaceted pedagogical tool, transforming the way we transmit and create knowledge (Helm & Guth, 2010; O'Dowd, 2018). A key milestone in the trajectory of telecollaboration was the creation of the Unicollaboration platform in 2016. Its main objectives were to promote the development of telecollaboration across all disciplines and to raise awareness of it at an institutional level. However, telecollaborative projects have not yet been fully embedded in curricula and continue to be perceived by many as peripheral (O'Dowd, 2013).

Dynamic learning platforms with opportunities for student interaction and engagement would help to mainstream telecollaboration and to ensure 'social presence' (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976). Social presence refers here to the degree of authentic communication in a virtual learning space which creates a sense of belonging and connectivity among the learners. In more recent years, scholars have realised the potential of

Web 2.0 technologies, such as discussion forums, to enhance the learning experience, by creating ‘real’ communication channels in such online spaces (Swan, 2003; Kear, 2010; AlJeraisy et al., 2015).

In this regard, a virtual exchange between three European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is presented in this report. The focus is on the topic selected as a basis for the exchange, the assessment strategy and the learning platform itself. In particular, the role of a discussion forum in generating a sense of social presence is highlighted.

Virtual Exchange

This pilot virtual exchange was coordinated by an Irish HEI during the second lockdown of the Covid pandemic (November/December 2020). The groundwork for this six week long TEP was laid over several months, initiated in March 2020 and culminating in September 2020. Initial contact between the national supervisors was made during a partnering fair, organised by Unicollaboration in March 2020 with thirty-six students from across the three institutions participating.

There was agreement across the participating institutions that student engagement in the project should be acknowledged and rewarded, i.e., learning and assessment should be embedded in the existing curriculum. The importance of integrating telecollaborative projects into the students' programmes and accrediting their workload has been highlighted by previous studies (Guth, Helm & O'Dowd , 2012).

It was also agreed that the students’ learning experience should be recorded and showcased to a wider audience, in order to raise awareness of the potential of this approach across disciplines. Funding from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (Ireland) was obtained in order to hold a webinar in January 2021 and a promotional video was created to capture student impressions of the virtual

exchange. Students were invited to attend the webinar and volunteers assisted with the discussion and chat box features.

Selecting an Appropriate Cross-Curricular Topic

The exchange involved students from diverse disciplines, studying at institutions located in Ireland, Germany and Spain. The disciplines spanned Business Administration, Tourism, Logistics, Digital Media, Languages, Biochemistry, Public Health and Entrepreneurship. As a result of the diversity of the participating students' interests, a suitably broad topic was required and 'Global Citizenship' selected, as it was considered of relevance to all disciplines. It was also felt that this topic choice would support the aim of the TEP which was to encourage and promote intercultural learning and exchange.

The topic encompassed both a reflective and an objective element: firstly, students were asked to look inwards and consider their own identities in a globally connected world and secondly, students were required to look outwards and consider some of the major challenges facing modern societies on a globalised scale and engage with the fellow participants to create a presentation collaboratively.

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Strategy

A robust assessment strategy ensured that the following learning outcomes associated with the TEP could be met:

Students should

1. Broaden their understanding of global citizenship by sourcing and evaluating scholarly articles
2. Interact synchronously with students from another cultural background, and finally

3. Create various forms of media and post them to the platform for asynchronous learning purposes.

Student workload was assessed using both synchronous and asynchronous tools, as follows:

- Synchronous
 - Zoom: three 1.5 hour sessions with 12 participants and 2 facilitators
 - Mandatory attendance and engagement (10%)
- Asynchronous
 - Discussion Forum (10%)
 - Individual essay (40%)
 - Team presentation (40%)

Students were instructed to attend three synchronous sessions facilitated by Unicollaboration during the course of the TEP. Sessions were interactive and participants were expected to engage in various group activities. The objective of these sessions was to create a climate of trust among all participants.

With regard to the asynchronous tasks, students were required to create a short post and photo to introduce themselves to their fellow ‘Teppers’ on the Discussion Forum. These posts could be a written piece (50 words), a short video or an audio recording (1-3 minutes) about the student or their culture to share with the TEP community (5%). In order to ensure that students would read each other’s posts, they were required to post at least two responses to their fellow participants on the discussion forum (5%).

Team formation for the group presentation was managed by the national tutors, in order to ensure a diverse mix of nationality and gender in each group. Students were instructed to discuss and agree (via Zoom, Microsoft teams, Skype or similar

videoconferencing media) a plan to deliver their presentation, with each member contributing two/three slides to the overall presentation. They were instructed to send a screenshot of the meeting to the tutor by the group leader within 48 hours. The final presentation was recorded using screencastomatic or similar software and submitted to the national tutors directly.¹

Learning Platform

The participating institutions used different learning systems (Blackboard and Moodle) which were not compatible with one another. Consequently, the Moodle platform provided by Unicollaborate was used and an access link was embedded in the local online learning platforms in each institution. The learning content was also organised into weekly chunks on the platform in some cases asynchronously, as the participating students had their timetabled hours at different times.

In order to comply with European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) for Unicollaboration and the participating institutions, login access was created for each participant. In addition, prior to accessing the platform, students were required to complete a compliance form in which they agreed to adhere to the GDPR. This was a crucial part of the parameters set for communication between participants, as the discussion forum (Section 3.3) involved the exchange of personal data (photos and other identifiers). As the students were over the age of 18, they took responsibility for their own online behaviour and were obliged to respect and protect the personal data shared on the platform.

¹ Screencastomatic is a video editing software widely used in educational settings. For more information visit: <https://screencast-o-matic.com/>

Social Presence on the Discussion Forum

Possibilities for connectivity on the discussion forum were numerous, with 36 students both posting their own introductory posts and responding to others. Conversation threads were randomly created, picked up, passed on, and developed.

The main language for communication used throughout this three-way TEP was English which functioned as the bridging language between the three institutions and each participant was required to have a minimum level of B1 in English on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Interestingly, even though English was the official lingua franca, students used diverse languages to engage with each other on the discussion forum and frequently expressed an interest in learning languages other than English, as illustrated below:

Tráthnóna maith daoibh [Good afternoon].

My name is Séan (pseudonym) and I am 23 years old. I live in an area on the north coast of Donegal. A lot of people here still speak Irish but the language is declining sadly.

I enjoy reading and I am interested in history. I have a great respect for other countries and languages. I can speak Irish and English natively and I would love to learn German. I started learning it on Duolingo this year but I haven't made much progress yet. Perhaps I'll get on better next year!!

I look forward to interacting with you all this semester.

Gach rath agus sonas oraibh uilig [Best of luck]

Séan (pseudonym)

This introductory post triggered a series of posts from three German, one Spanish and one Chinese student on a year abroad using elements of their native languages. This may have been encouraged by Sean's initial use of Irish.

Two students majoring in the Irish language as part of their degree in Business regularly used Irish phrases with translations perhaps to add flavour to their posts. Other Irish students, who had spent time abroad in Spain, also communicated in Spanish, possibly in order to break down communication barriers and connect with their fellow participants.

The posts further indicate that the non-Anglophones were challenged linguistically during this virtual exchange, while the Anglophones were in their linguistic comfort zones. Nonetheless, the evidence in the discussion forum that social presence was successfully created, as 247 posts were uploaded, significantly more than required for assessment purposes (i.e. $36 \times 3 = 99$).

Conclusion

The virtual exchange described in this report provides an exemplar for educators considering incorporating telecollaboration into their programmes. The students involved came from a range of different academic specialisms and locations and availed of the opportunity offered by this TEP to develop their intercultural, linguistic and technological skills during this six week programme. The approaches to assessment were designed to ensure that there was a high level of both student engagement and social presence.

While this small-scale project has focussed on intercultural and digital skills, a similar model could, for example, also be developed to create authentic communication channels for those focussed on increasing their language proficiency either as a precursor or alternative to a period of study abroad. This experience suggests that the creative development embedding of telecollaboration more extensively in the curricula of Higher Education Institutions could contribute positively to the internationalisation of Higher Education.

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