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Virtual exchange: Future-ready teaching of multiliteracies across borders and cultures

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Abstract

Virtual exchange is an online form of internationalization at home. Students from different countries collaborate in small, international groups on tasks joined by a common theme. They combine their expertise when solving problems together. The teachers act as mentors, providing facilitation and support for the students during the virtual exchange. The student teams work independently by selecting the tools for the collaboration, allocating the tasks and creating the group's final product.

Virtual exchange is a transnational learning opportunity which enables students to learn and practice how to efficiently combine and make use of their digital, visual, critical, linguistic and intercultural competencies (Boche, 2014) in order to feel ready for and empowered in working life.

1 Introduction

Multiliteracies include a set of literacy practices and soft skills that enable social participation in a digitalized, mediatized and globalized society. As pointed out by the New London Group (1996), the original coiner of the term, teachers should act as designers of learning processes and of learning environments to enable students' agency in their multiliteracy development. In the 21st century there is a need for multiliterate graduates who can operate and collaborate successfully in the global labour market by combining their digital, visual, critical, linguistic and intercultural competencies (Boche, 2014).

In higher education, virtual exchange projects offer a great opportunity for the students to acquire, practice and develop their multiliteracies in facilitated, educational contexts. The Virtual Exchange Coalition (2019) defines virtual exchange as "technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programmes" which make it possible for young people to experience online collaboration in an intercultural context (see also O'Dowd, 2018). In practical terms, students from two or more countries work in virtual teams for 6-8 weeks to answer questions and/or to solve problems centred around a theme.

The projects are usually integrated into curriculum-based courses of the participating HEIs, but are not dependent on formal agreements or contracts. The teachers involved negotiate and agree on a joint theme, the learning outcomes, the schedule, the tools, the shared learning environment, and the tasks. Thus, virtual exchange is built on a flexible teaching and learning framework, which gives scope for creativity and variety in the teaching of multiliteracies.

At the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, where I work as a senior lecturer, I arranged virtual exchange for my students with universities from the Czech Republic, Poland, Singapore,

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Spain, the Netherlands and Japan (Háhn, 2019). The present study provides an overview of the pedagogical design of virtual exchange, based on my experience as a teacher. You can read more about the projects in my professional blog: <https://judithahn.blogspot.com/>.

2 The pedagogical design of virtual exchange

2.1 Schedule

Proper planning and pedagogical design are crucial to the success of virtual exchange. Since the collaboration takes place between two or more HEIs, the teachers have to make sure that their jointly designed project fits their own and their students' academic calendars in terms of the teaching periods, holidays, exam seasons, business trips and other work commitments. The projects run for a fixed period, usually 6-8 weeks. It is best to plan virtual exchange when all of the participating institutions have teaching periods. Problems might arise when the students at one university have study breaks, exams or other commitments which prevent them from participating fully in the project. It is important to consider this during the planning of virtual exchange.

In one of my projects, for example, the students from the partner university had a longish job-hunting period in the spring, which kept them too busy to be able to concentrate on virtual exchange. Their tasks were simple (only personal introductions and some warm-up activities), but the fact that they were not on campus caused delays in their task completion. Virtual exchange requires continuous commitment and online availability. It is best to choose a time in academic calendars when the participating students and their teachers are on campus.

2.2 Theme

Each virtual exchange should have a main theme that provides a contextual framework for the tasks. The theme can be discipline-specific: for example, "Teaching English in elementary education", or a broader topic that allows interdisciplinary collaboration, such as "Climate change" or "Student life on campus". By exploring a theme together, the students can learn from each other and thus gain invaluable insights from their peers.

My students from the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) study languages to become language teachers or language experts. In a virtual exchange they were collaborating with language teacher trainees from Japan, comparing the English language textbooks in the two countries. In another project, my students were working together with business and IT students from the Czech Republic, collecting and comparing data about the use of English in their cities, with each group focusing on a different domain of life (e.g. commerce, public transportation, advertising). The language expert students from Finland approached the topic from the perspective of sociolinguistics, while the Czech students interpreted the findings with relevance to the use of English in their future working lives.

2.3 Tasks and platforms

In most virtual exchanges, the students work in groups of 4-7 to solve a series of tasks together. These can build into a bigger project outcome, which can be a group presentation, a video (e.g. a company's "About us" introduction, a promotional or an instructional video), a report, a website, a blog or any other digital, multimodal product that answers a question or solves a problem. In a project with Poland, the international student teams of tourism experts and linguists created promotional videos that advertised the cities of Poznań and Jyväskylä for tourists. At the end of the project there was a virtual display of all the videos, which was followed by a round of feedback from all the students and teachers involved.

The tasks are designed such that they ideally help the students make progress towards the final project outcome. It is good to have interim deadlines and checkpoints, when the student teams submit their reports on their work and get feedback from their teachers. The first week of virtual exchange should be about personal introductions. It is important to break the ice by making the students get to know each other with the help of warm-up activities in an opening video conference and informal social interaction on an asynchronous platform. The groups can also choose a name for themselves and agree on their internal working etiquette.

Based on my experience, it is very good if the project has an online platform that functions as a transnational learning environment. All the important information, such as the project description, the tasks, the deadlines, and the teachers' messages, can be shared in one space this way. In my projects we used Google Classroom, Canvas, Schoology and even a closed Facebook group for this purpose. In addition to the formal learning space, the student teams had to agree on their own communication channels and collaboration platforms. The most popular tools were WhatsApp, Messenger, Line, Zoom, Skype, Google Docs and Google Slides.

2.4 Assessment

The student teams receive written feedback from the teachers on their interim reports and on the final product. In most of the projects the students are required to write a learning diary (or an e-portfolio) that they have to submit when the virtual exchange has ended. In cases where the project is integrated into a course, the students' contribution is usually assessed as part of the course work and can thus influence the course grade. If the virtual exchange is an independent project and not part of a curriculum-based course, the students may get credits for the completion of the project on a pass/fail basis.

3 Conclusions

The increasingly global and connected nature of work-life often requires virtual teamwork, with employees collaborating from a distance, making meaning in a digital, multimodal and multilingual way. Virtual exchange offers a great opportunity for students to acquire the skills and literacies needed for transnational online teamwork.

The projects are greatly dependent on the creativity and commitment of the collaborating teachers. Completing a training course is not a pre-condition for arranging such online projects between HEIs. What is crucial is that the teachers start their planning in time and agree on the project's theme and the learning outcomes. For those who are interested in taking a training course, excellent opportunities are being offered at present by Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (for more information, see their website <https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual>).

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