

Telecollaboration: Where Are We Now?

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Abstract. This paper presents the results of a European-wide survey regarding the practice of foreign language telecollaboration or Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) in higher education. The survey was carried out as part of a European project, INTENT (Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education) which was awarded funding by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning programme primarily to achieve more effective integration of telecollaboration in university institutions. Findings reveal the current ‘state-of-the-art’ of telecollaboration in Europe: an educational practice which is highly valued by educators and students who have experience with it, but also a time-consuming activity which is difficult to organize and receives limited institutional recognition or support. Recommendations are made on the basis of these findings as to how telecollaboration can be supported and more fully integrated into higher education.

Keywords: telecollaboration, CMC, intercultural exchange, internationalization, project.

1. Introduction

Foreign language telecollaboration or online intercultural exchange engages groups of foreign language learners in virtual intercultural interaction and exchange with partner classes in geographically distant locations (Dooly, 2008; Guth & Helm, 2010; O’Dowd, 2007). In primary and secondary education, telecollaboration projects have been supported by major networks and virtual platforms such as ePals (www.epals.com), the European Union’s Etwinning platform (www.etwinning.net) and the global network iEarn (www.iearn.org). In higher education however, it has received little support on an institutional level or on a European level.

This paper reports on a survey carried out as part of a European project, INTENT (www.intent-project.eu) which was awarded funding by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning programme primarily in order to achieve more effective integration

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of telecollaboration in university institutions. The first phase of the project consisted of a survey of European educators and students on telecollaboration in order to establish the current state of telecollaboration in Europe.

2. Method

The aim of the survey was to identify the characteristics of telecollaborative practices currently undertaken by European university educators and to explore the barriers which practitioners encounter when organizing online intercultural exchanges (Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2012). The project team also sought the views and opinions of European students with different OIE experiences, with regard to the impact that participating in online exchange has had on them. Three versions of the survey were developed: one for educators with experience in OIE, another for those who have not yet had experience in OIE and a final survey for students with experience in OIE. The survey was translated into French, German and Italian. Complete responses were obtained from 210 university educators in 23 different European countries and 131 students with experience in telecollaboration.

In the second part of the study, the project team also collected various case studies of universities, partnerships and telecollaborative networks which would provide a representative, qualitative picture of the type of online intercultural exchanges which are being carried out around Europe and which have achieved a certain level of integration in their institutions' study programmes. The case studies involved exchanges taking place between universities in Ireland and Germany, Italy and the UK, Sweden and the USA, and Latvia and France, among others. The collection also included an example of a telecollaborative network of various exchange partners working together as well as the description of an Italian university which had staff involved in multiple projects.

3. Discussion

The survey and case study findings confirmed much of what the team already believed to be the case regarding telecollaboration in higher education, but also revealed interesting new information. The findings, which are summarised in this section, have important implications for higher education institutions and policy makers.

The majority of exchanges (63%) reported involved the use of English as a foreign language. However, a considerable number of teachers of French, German and Spanish also responded as well as teachers of less commonly taught languages such as Italian, Chinese, Finnish, Greek, Turkish, Hungarian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Catalan and Rumanian. Bilingual exchanges were the most common type, with over 50% of respondents indicating experience in this type of exchange while a third indicated monolingual exchanges such as those between teacher trainees of, say,

Spanish, with learners of Spanish as a foreign language. A fifth of respondents had implemented exchanges using a lingua franca such as English among predominantly non-native speakers of English.

Most OIEs currently involve classes from European universities collaborating with partner classes in US universities. There are currently few exchanges between universities in European countries and there are also few connecting Europe to Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

It was also interesting to note that foreign language educators rarely find telecollaborative partners through institutional partnerships such as those established under the Erasmus programme. Instead, most establish exchanges with colleagues from their own academic networks or from contacts made at conferences. Furthermore, whilst OIEs are strongly believed to have the potential of supporting physical mobility by engaging learners with students in their future host institution before departure, and also by supporting learners during their period abroad, the research team found very few examples of such exchanges currently being carried out.

OIEs are generally carried out by highly motivated educators who believe strongly in the outcomes of these exchanges. They have often had experience in OIEs as part of their training and may also have a research interest in OIE. Educators who have had experience in OIE are likely to repeat the experience, since the majority of respondents with experience in OIE had been involved in more than one telecollaborative exchange. Although the majority of experienced telecollaborators reported that OIEs were time-consuming (83%) and difficult to organize (54%), and that often collaborating with partner teachers was challenging (55%), the vast majority (93%) agreed that carrying out OIEs in their classes had been a positive experience.

Whilst telecollaborative exchanges are recognized by some universities as valuable activities for internationalization and for the development of student mobility, few institutions are aware of the extra time and workload such projects require and are either unwilling or unable to provide adequate support to staff who want to organize such exchanges. In fact, educators with experience in telecollaboration indicated lack of time and the difficulty of organizing online exchanges as the main factors they believed were hindering the adoption of OIE by other educators, as well as the lack of institutional recognition and support.

Telecollaboration seems to have different levels of integration in study programmes, and it is not always assessed. Most practitioners who do assess students focus on the intercultural and communicative learning outcomes of their exchanges. Although participation in OIEs does not always bring students academic credit, the impact of OIEs seems to be educationally significant. Many students reported that participating in a telecollaborative exchange led them to become more open to others, accepting and understanding of differences and to realise that their own points of view were not necessarily “the best or only ones”. Many also reported establishing long term

friendships with their telecollaboration peers, keeping in touch once exchanges were over and some even visiting one another. OIEs are often an incentive for students to engage in mobility. Telecollaboration not only benefits students' learning but can also contribute to educators' academic careers, for example, by establishing connections to new academic networks and enabling them to engage in staff mobility visits with other universities.

The most frequently used tools in OIEs in Europe are email and virtual learning environments. However, there is also a considerably high use of audio/video conferencing which until recently was not so widely available. The main difficulty reported in using audio/video conferencing was organization due to the difficulties in working with partners in very different time zones. Social networking tools and Web 2.0 technologies, however, are also being used, and their use is likely to increase.

Data from the case studies also helped to identify factors which can help practitioners to integrate telecollaborative projects more seamlessly into their institutions and classes. First of all, the support of department heads is vital for the successful integration of exchanges. Their support ensures that exchanges continue even when particular staff members change institutions. Also, by maintaining the same exchange partners over long periods, telecollaborative exchanges are more likely to become integrated into an institution's activities. Signing an exchange agreement or memorandum of understanding can provide partners with a sense of security when planning exchanges and drawing up course guides for the coming academic year. Finally, although we found different levels of integration of OIEs in institutions, ensuring that students will receive credit for participating in OIEs undoubtedly helps both institutions and students give more importance to the experience.

4. Conclusions

The survey and case study findings clearly reveal the positive impact of OIEs both for educators and students, and at the same time the barriers which need to be overcome in order to facilitate the integration of OIE in higher education. A series of recommendations have been drawn up by the research team for university senior management and European policy decision makers, including greater support for educators through training, agreements and grants for OIEs, which can be seen as a form of 'virtual mobility', the awarding of European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS) for student participation in OIE and some kind of formal recognition for educators' and institutions' involvement in OIE.

The INTENT team is also using the survey findings to support the rest of the project which involves the development of a set of tools, telecollaborative models and partner networks to overcome barriers and facilitate telecollaboration; publication of an online training manual and holding training workshops to train and inform the foreign language learning and teaching community about OIE and finally engaging decision

makers at institutional, regional and national levels in a collaborative dialogue as to how telecollaboration can be effectively employed as a tool for the achievement of the Bologna process.

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