UNICollaboration
Journal of VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

The long and winding road...

Francesca Helm[1]

Abstract

The long and winding road is a metaphor for a journey, often used to describe life journeys and the challenges encountered. The metaphor was used for the title of my keynote to refer both to the journey towards the current position of virtual exchange in education policy – but also the long road ahead. This paper aims to explore the emergence of virtual exchange in educational policy and how it has been adopted by non-profit organisations, educational institutions, and policy makers to address geo- and socio-political tensions. Though still a relatively new field, in recent years there have been some important developments in terms of policy statements and public investments in virtual exchange. The paper starts by looking at the current state-of-the-art in terms of virtual exchange in education policy and initiatives in Europe. Then, using an approach based on 'episode studies' from the policy literature, the paper explores the main virtual exchange schemes and initiatives that have drawn the attention of European policy makers. The paper closes by looking at some of the lessons we have learnt from research on the practice of virtual exchange, and how this can inform us as we face the long road ahead of us. The focus of this paper is on the European context not because I assume it to be the most important or influential, but rather because it is the one I know best, since it is the context in which I have been working.

Keywords: virtual exchange, telecollaboration, policy, intercultural learning.

"The past is linked to the present and plays an important role in imagining the future" (Rizvi, 2008, p. 32).

1. University of Padua, Padua, Italy; francesca.helm@unipd.it

How to cite this article: Helm, F. (2018). The long and winding road… *Journal of Virtual Exchange, 1*, 41-63. Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.3

© 2018 Francesca Helm (CC BY)

1. Recent developments in virtual exchange and policy experimentations

In recent years the pedagogic approach of virtual exchange and the field as a whole has drawn the attention of policy makers in various parts of the world. In Europe alone there are several policy experimentations funded by the European Commission in which virtual exchange is being piloted as an approach to education which has the potential of becoming mainstreamed (O'Dowd, 2018). The EVALuating and UpscAling Telecollaborative teacher Education (EVALUATE) project, which began in 2017, involves not only educators and researchers, but a network of Spanish universities and representatives from several education ministries[2]. It explores the impact of telecollaborative exchange on future teachers' digital-pedagogical competencies, intercultural awareness, and foreign language skills. The pilot has involved 30 partnerships carrying out exchanges with almost 1000 future teachers, and ministry partners are collaborating with the team in order to disseminate the findings and introduce policy measures which will support the adoption of virtual exchange in pre-service teacher education (O'Dowd, 2018).

The Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (EVOLVE) project was launched in January 2018 and aims to mainstream virtual exchange as an innovative form of collaborative international learning across disciplines in higher education institutions in Europe and beyond. It was funded as a Forward-Looking Cooperation Project[3], that is, a project which aims "to identify, test, develop or assess innovative policy approaches that have the potential of becoming mainstreamed and giving input for improving education and training systems"[4].

In January 2018, the European Commission launched the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project which aims to "**expand the reach and scope of the Erasmus**+ programme via virtual exchanges" by linking "**young people** (aged 18 to 30 years), youth workers, youth organisations, students and academics in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean using online learning activities and technology-enabled solutions in order to **strengthen 'people to people contacts' and intercultural dialogue**" (p. 10)[5].

2. This Key Action 3 project (582934-EPP-1-2016-2-ES-EPPKA3-PI-POLICY) is led by Robert O'Dowd and involves several university partners but also the ministries of Portugal, Spain, and the regional Junta De Castilla Y León, the Ministry of Human Capacities, Hungary, and the Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts of Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

3. Funded under Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Support for policy reform, Priority 5 – Achieving the aims of the renewed EU strategy for higher education (EACEA 41/2016). Project is led by Sake Jager at the University of Groningen.

4. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/key-action-3-support-for-policy-reform/prospective-initiatives/forward-looking-cooperation-projects_en

5. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/tender-specifications_eve.pdf

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange[6] is piloting several different models of virtual exchange that are promoted through a page on the European Youth Portal, which was launched in March 2018. The models of exchange promoted can be split into two main categories: ready-made exchanges which involve multiple partners[7], and small-scale, teacher-led, Transnational Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Projects (TEPs)[8] and debates. Examples of the former are interactive Open Online Courses (iOOCs) that bring together content in the form of short video lectures and online facilitated dialogue. The latter, TEPs, are developed by educators and youth workers who, after following an online, experiential training course, design and implement their own exchange to meet their specific needs and target groups.

In June 2018, six months into the project, 3265 participants had already taken part in some of the project activities[9]. The reported impact is extremely positive with 94.5% of participants reporting they were glad to have taken part in the activity, 86% interested in further opportunities of engaging with Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities, and 94% of participants agreeing it had a positive impact on their ability to work in a culturally diverse workplace. Furthermore, over 130 educators and youth workers have taken part in training programmes which support them in the collaborative design and subsequent implementation of transnational virtual exchanges which meet the needs of their specific target groups and activities, and 265 have trained to become facilitators.

The pilot project has been deemed successful enough to continue in 2019. In European Commission documents regarding Erasmus funding for 2021-2027, virtual exchange is mentioned several times as a tool for making the next Erasmus 2021-2027 programme, Erasmus For All, more inclusive: "Better outreach to disadvantaged people through new formats such as virtual exchanges and shorter learning periods abroad" (European Commission, 2018b, n.p.).

Yet virtual exchange is not a completely new pedagogical practice. As Steve Thorne (2018) said in his keynote at this same third UNICollaboration conference to those of us who have been engaged in this activity and research for years or even decades now, it is difficult to understand why this activity has taken so long to draw the attention of policy makers and educational institutions. The internationalisation expert Hans De Wit (2016) also remarked on this,

> "[m]ore striking than the fact that there are already a substantive number of OIE (Online Intercultural Exchange) experiences in place is the fact that these cases are not

6. The project is being implemented by a consortium which includes Search for Common Ground, Soliya, Sharing Perspectives Foundation, UNIMED, Anna Lindh Foundation, and UNICollaboration.

7. Described in O'Dowd (2018) as 'service-provider approaches' to virtual exchange

8. Based on a collaboratively designed syllabus.

9. https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_en

> identified and recognised as innovative forms of joint curriculum development and internationalisation" (p. 80).

So the question is, why is there **now** this interest in virtual exchange on a policy level, and what are the factors that may have led to this? Also what are the implications of this engagement for educators?

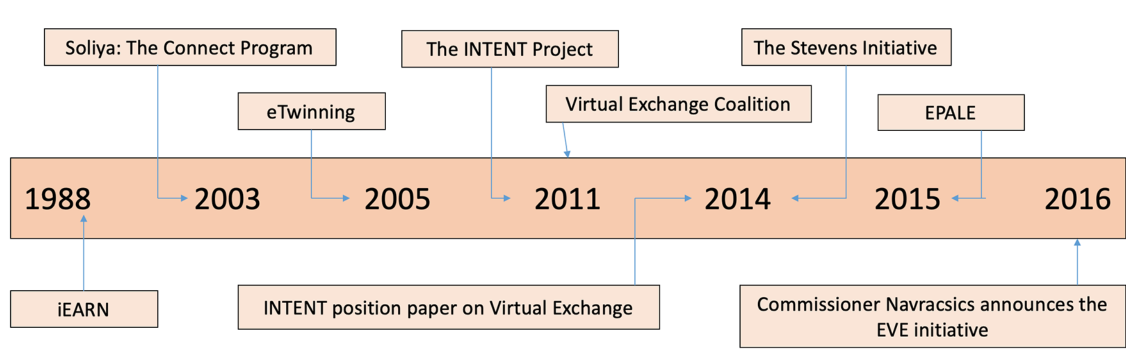
In seeking to answer these questions, I draw from the fields of policy studies and international relations. I first of all adopt an approach known as episode studies (Start & Hovland, 2004), which is used in policy literature, in order to explore the developments which may have led to this recent policy change in the European context. I then explore international education and virtual exchange as tools of soft power (Nye, 1990, 2004). I close by looking at the role of research in informing policies and practices and take into consideration some of the recommendations that have been made in the key notes at previous UNICollaboration conferences, and their implications for future developments in virtual exchange practice and policy.

2. Factors leading to policy change

In episode studies, a historical narrative leading up to the policy change in question is constructed. This involves creating a timeline of key policy decisions and practices along with important documents and events (Start & Hovland, 2004) which allows for the identification of motivating factors which may have prompted the policy change and the extent to which research may have contributed to this. Within the context of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, a timeline was indeed created as part of the Feasibility Study (PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017), and this is the starting point of my exploration of milestones in this long and winding road (Figure 1). This is not because the timeline is a complete and objective record of the history of virtual exchange, but rather because it is a representation of what was deemed of relevance for policy makers intending to fund a European pilot project in the field of virtual exchange. The need to understand intercultural exchange historically is also highlighted by Rizvi (2008) who writes that "in a world in which social networks of money, technologies, people and ideas increasingly shape life options and chances, thinking historically about global interconnectivity is indispensable. […] The past is linked to the present and plays an important role in imagining the future" (p. 32).

The beginning of virtual exchange is marked as 1988 with reference to iEARN, now a well known NGO which, according to the website, has spread to 140 countries, with a network of 30,000 projects in 30 languages and reaches 50,000 teachers and 2,000,000 young people.

Figure 1. A timeline of virtual exchanges (adapted from PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017, p. 26)



iEARN grew out of the New York/Moscow Schools Telecommunications Project (NYS-MSTP) which was launched in 1988 by Peter Copen[10] and the Copen Family Fund. This project was seen to respond to a perceived need to connect youth from the two countries during a time which was marked by the tensions between the United States and the USSR that had developed during the Cold War. The pilot project, between 12 schools in each nation, was supported by the Sciences in Moscow Academy and the New York State Board of Education. Students worked in both English and Russian on projects based on their curricula, which had been designed by participating teachers. The project was based on the assumption that "the problems facing the world are created by people, either individually or collectively, and that these problems can be resolved through effective communication. Telecommunications can be the tool which brings people together in cooperative ventures to apply the attitudes and skills of effective listening and problem solving" (Magi Educational Services, 1992, p. 3).

The project was expanded in the early 1990s to include China, Israel, Australia, Spain, Canada, Argentina, and the Netherlands. iEARN then began to develop other projects, for example Learning Circles and the Orillas project (Cummins & Sayers, 1995) to build partnerships with educators across the globe. Cummins and Sayers (1995) have described the potential of these types of global learning networks as challenging top-down control over learning, which dominates many societies. In their eyes, electronic networks were key tools for world-wide problem solving as they offered opportunities to increase intercultural communications and cooperation and presented a powerful alternative to the directions that educational reform in the United States was taking at the time. In their view, these types of online intercultural collaborations derived their impact not from technology, but from "a

10. https://myhero.com/Peter_Copen_2010

vision of how education can enact, in microcosm, a radical restructuring of power relations both in domestic and global arenas" (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p. 8).

The next milestone on the timeline is 2003 with Soliya's Connect Program. In a different historical and geopolitical context, but with a similar vision to iEARN, the origins of this virtual exchange project lay in the perceived need to address the specific political and social tensions of the time and the polarisation of societies. Just two years after 9/11 and the beginning of George Bush's War on Terror – Soliya's Connect Program was designed to address the tensions between 'Western' and 'predominantly Arab and Muslim' societies, tensions which since then, many would argue, have been exacerbated. As Himelfarb and Idriss (2011) write:

> "[t]he explicit focus is on connecting students from the West with those in the Arab and Muslim world and on maximizing impact along four learning metrics: empathy, cross-cultural communication skills, critical thinking, and activation (or pursuit of further cross-cultural engagement)" (p. 4).

Soliya's Connect Program is based on principles of intergroup contact and sustained interaction between members of what are seen as opposing groups. Research in the field of social psychology which relates to Gordon Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis – suggests that interactions between members of 'opposing' groups should be promoted to reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations (Paolini, Harwood, Hewstone, & Neumann, 2018)[11]. According to Allport's (1954) theory, certain conditions should be met for optimal contact, that is equal status, common goals, no intergroup competition, and sanction from authorities. A recent meta-analysis of relevant research has found these conditions to be facilitative but not necessary (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). The Connect Program is also informed by research on the impact of media on intergroup relations (Argo, Idriss, & Fancy, 2009), their polarising influence on cross-cultural relations, but also on the belief and evidence that media can have a constructive impact on how we perceive and address global issues. The project thus positions itself among initiatives that use media for social change, and aims to promote sustained contact in a safe space, and to activate young people to continue seeking opportunities for intergroup contact. Through the Connect Program, students from a wide range of partner universities are placed in small, diverse dialogue groups that meet over a period of eight weeks for two-hour sessions of online facilitated dialogue. The sessions are led by facilitators, often volunteer alumni of the Connect Program who have been trained in the implementation of this form of online dialogue. Since the project began, Soliya has established partnerships with educational

11. According to the theory certain conditions have to be met for this contact to lead to positive results, and these include equal status, cooperation, and sharing a common goal.

institutions across the globe and thousands of students have participated in the programme, which is integrated into institutional curricula (Elliot-Gower & Hill, 2015; Helm, 2018).

The two organisations, Soliya and iEARN, together with Global Nomads Group, were founding members of the Virtual Exchange Coalition which also appears on the timeline above, in 2011. Essentially, this is an advocacy coalition, an important type of actor in the field of public policy. This type of coalition contains “people from a variety of positions [] who share a particular belief system and who show a non-trivial degree of coordinated activity over time” (Cairney, 2013, n.p.). The goal of this coalition, as reported on their website, was to work “together to foster a more supportive and generative ecosystem for virtual exchange programming to develop, innovate and grow. Our goal is to make it possible for all young people to have a meaningful cross-cultural experience as part of their education”[12].

If we analyse the Virtual Exchange Coalition’s website from a linguistic and multimodal perspective we see that it speaks the language of policy makers, who do not have the time or interest in delving deep into academic research (Start & Hovland, 2004). The website offers a concise definition, “virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs”[13] (para. 1), information about *evidence-based measures* of the impact of virtual exchange as well as *testimonials* of participants, which provide *proof of concept*. The website also provides information about major milestones in their work supporting this emerging field, which is supported visually by a timeline that includes milestones regarding United States policy and virtual exchange, for example endorsements, policy documents and reports, workshops, and statements about virtual exchange by key political figures such as Jim Kerry and then-president of the US, Barack Obama. The coalition’s work was reported in the journal Foreign Policy which highlighted the potential of virtual exchange for public diplomacy: “[t]he surging growth of the online world has shown that it can quickly transmit volatility and disruption, sparking offline violence. What the success of these virtual exchanges proves is that there is a reciprocal potential for peacebuilding that might be just as powerful” (Himelfarb, 2014, para. 14).

The advocacy work of the coalition was instrumental in the establishing of the Stevens’ Initiative, a US-born virtual exchange initiative which is the next stop on the timeline. It was established in 2014 and has been providing funding for virtual exchange through *Calls for Participation*. The Stevens Initiative is managed by the Aspen Institute and involves the U.S. Department of State, the Bezos

12. The Coalition, originally called the Exchange 2.0 Coalition, was formed by three large virtual exchange organisations based in the United States (Global Nomads Group, iEARN-USA, and Soliya) who with different models of virtual exchange address a wide range of demographics, from school children to university students. They present virtual exchange as bringing together new technologies, public diplomacy, and the benefits of exchange that study abroad programmes have traditionally fostered – albeit to a very small percentage of the United States population.

13. http://virtualexchangecoalition.org/

Family Foundation, and the governments of some countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, a geographic area where the United States is investing heavily in public diplomacy initiatives to seek to improve how they are perceived by the general population. It brings together governmental actors and philanthropic foundations who have long supported one another in the pursuing of an interconnected global market through education and development projects – for better or for worse (Pennycook, 1994/2017).

It may be the size of the United States and its geographical distance from other parts of the world, as well as factors such as the high cost and security concerns of international travel to certain regions which have made virtual exchange appealing not only to United States policy makers but also to educators in higher education and schools (De Wit, 2013; Rubin & Guth, 2015; Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008).

Virtual exchange was also happening in Europe, though no projects or initiatives appear on the timeline until 2005. What is known as telecollaboration in the field of foreign language education has been implemented in Europe by language teachers, often with partners in the United States, since the 1990's. This occurred very much in isolation, that is within the confines of the exchange partnership, not at institutional or organisational level. However, there has been considerable dissemination and exchange with fellow practitioners at conferences[14] and through academic publications. Indeed, telecollaboration in higher education can be seen as a bottom-up or grassroots practice of individual practitioners, very often in language learning contexts, and not on the radar, even within their own institutions, let alone on a regional or national level (O'Dowd, 2011).

The first European initiative to appear on this timeline is eTwinning in 2005. This is relevant to the development of virtual exchange in higher education as it is the European Commmission's flagship exchange programme for schools. On the website it defines itself as "the community for schools in Europe" which offers a "platform for staff working in a school in one of the European countries involved, to communicate, collaborate, develop projects, share and, in short, feel and be part of the most exciting learning community in Europe"[15]. The main objectives were to promote school twinning as an opportunity for pupils to learn and practise information and communication technology skills and to promote awareness of European identity and citizenship. As of January 2018, according to the website, over 70,000 projects are running in classrooms across Europe, with 190,000 registered schools. eTwinning projects may be seen as a form of virtual exchange, though there is not always direct contact between pupils in the different classes. Another European platform

14. In Europe this has been largely through EUROCALL and the UNICollaboration conferences, regional workshops, and proceedings.

15. https://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm

on the timeline is EPALE[16] which is a community for professionals working in adult learning across Europe. This platform, dated 2015, is not directly related to virtual exchange as it is based largely on sharing content and information about projects, resources, and events.

Another European project on the timeline is the INTENT Project, which began in 2011, funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning programme. The project was based on the premise that virtual exchange (referred to as online intercultural exchange) was having a very limited impact in higher education, due to fragmentation, challenges that practitioners faced and a lack of institutional support on both national and European levels[17]. Although the project itself ended in 2014, there are several possible reasons why this short-term initiative drew the attention of policy makers:

- it gathered large-scale evidence, mapping, if you like, the 'state of the art' of telecollaboration in Europe (Guth, 2016; Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2014; Helm, 2015);
- it proved to be sustainable beyond the life of the project with the creation of a platform for virtual exchange[18] for educators working in higher education, the establishment of the organisation UNICollaboration which brings together a community of practitioners and researchers, and this Journal of Virtual Exchange (O'Dowd, 2018).

The position paper developed by UNICollaboration on virtual exchange[19] also features on the timeline, perhaps as it was the first European initiative of this nature. The position paper was an attempt to 'translate' the research knowledge acquired through the project and two decades of practice and research in the field for decision makers. It also sought to highlight the relevance of virtual exchange outside the realm of foreign language education, but as a tool for the internationalisation of any curricula.

The position paper called for:

- a coherent strategy for virtual exchange in higher education on European, national, and institutional levels in order to mitigate fragmentation and enhance consolidation of

16. EPALE is an initiative of the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the European Commission.

17. This 30-month project had two key aims, to raise greater awareness among students, educators and (senior) managers at university level of online intercultural exchange as a pedagogical model serving the goal of virtual exchange in foreign language education, and to achieve more effective integration in university institutions.

18. https://uni-collaboration.eu

19. https://uni-collaboration.eu/node/996

approaches and resources that will enable this practice to be mainstreamed in higher education;

- a system of grants for virtual exchanges to cover the costs for the development and implementation of innovative online exchange projects;
- the integration of virtual exchanges as an important component of quality higher education curricula, and their recognition with credits and inclusion in the European Diploma Supplement; and
- support for more research into measuring the impact of virtual intercultural exchange programs (UNICollaboration, 2014, n.p.).

It drew the support of scholars of international education (De Wit, 2016), virtual exchange organisations such as the Sharing Perspectives Foundation, and some European universities, and has been referenced in various policy-related documents, including a report for the European Parliament and the Feasibility Study (De Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015; PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017). This position paper highlights an important move outside of the academic sphere and an attempt to speak and communicate in languages which are relevant and understandable to different target groups, policy makers above all.

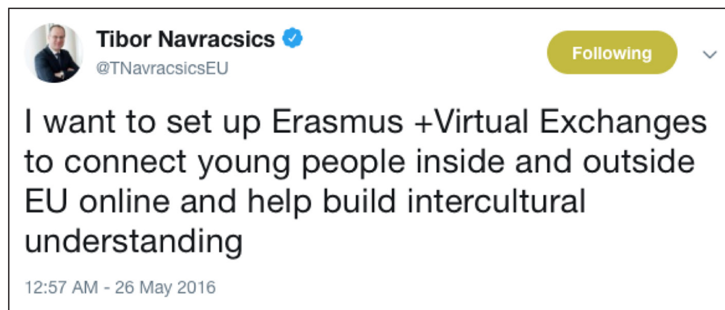
Both the establishment of the Virtual Exchange Coalition and the UNICollaboration (2014) position paper can be seen as steps which attempted to bring together various stakeholders in the fields of higher education and virtual exchange to further the field. An important part of this was a convergence in the language used, which came from a recognition that the differences in terminology have perhaps contributed to the fragmentation in the field and lack of understanding about virtual exchange. The debate and dialogue around terminology, practices, and beliefs – what brings us together and also what distinguishes us (amply discussed in O'Dowd, 2018) proved to be enriching, as well as challenging at times. However, it is not unusual that different traditions in disciplines (ranging from healthcare to education) lack a common terminology, groups often have their own terms, or their own perceptions of the same terminology. Indeed terminology science has become an academic discipline in itself and informs the development of terminology policies or strategies for organizations (Kockaert & Steurs, 2014).

The timeline ends with the first mention of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange – which in this timeline we see as dating to 2016. This is when Commissioner Navracsics first launched the idea in a tweet (see Figure 2 below).

The feasibility study was carried out (PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017) soon after this announcement, entailing interviews with several virtual exchange stakeholders, many of whom

are linked to the organisations and platforms mentioned in the timeline. One of the conclusions of the feasibility study was that no single organisation had the capacity to implement the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project as envisioned by the European Commission.

Figure 2. Tweet by the European Commissioner for education, culture, youth, and sport about Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange



2.1. Virtual exchange, international education, and soft power

Some of the episodes that I have explored in the section above highlight the Commission's interest in virtual exchange as a tool that has the potential to meet the political and societal agenda of making constructive connections between people across cultural and physical borders. Indeed, as is explicitly mentioned in the feasibility study (PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017), Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, like the Erasmus Mobility programme, is considered to be an element of the European Union's soft power and public diplomacy.

According to Joseph Nye (1990, 2004), soft power is a tool for public diplomacy, that is how nations seek to secure influence overseas by persuasion or attraction rather than by military force, threats, or economic sanctions. A nation's soft power is the attractiveness of its culture, political ideals, and policies, "[w]hen our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced" (Nye, 2004, p. 105). In his view, the success of public diplomacy depends on three dimensions:

- daily communication, which involves explaining the context of domestic and foreign policy (including elements like foreign press);
- strategic communication, in which a set of themes is developed, much like what occurs in a political or advertising campaign (branding of central themes or advancing a particular government policy); and

- the development of lasting relationships with key individuals over many years through scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences, and access to media. (Nye, 2004, in PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017, p. 142).

It is this last dimension which education addresses and international exchange programmes (including virtual exchange) are seen as being powerful tools of soft power. In the post-war era, the United States has been the greatest influence in this respect, consolidating itself as a "neocolonial power" through a range of political, economic, academic, and cultural institutions and the administration of awards and scholarships (Pennycook, 1994/2017, p. 153). The United States' Fulbright programme, for example, is perhaps the most famous, and was established shortly after World War II "to encourage mutual understanding between Americans and people from other countries"[20] – currently over 160. The global spread of English language is also seen as an instrument of soft power, supported by the rise of the Internet which, it is argued, has become an international system in which the United States has "undoubted hegemony" (Rose, 2005, p. 5).

The Internet has clearly had an impact on the exercise of soft power in all of Nye's dimensions. Governments are beginning to employ digital ambassadors, Denmark and France being amongst the first (Sandre, 2017). Interactions between states are occurring at unprecedented speed. Even more significant perhaps is the increasing power that non-governmental organisations can wield through the Internet (Rose, 2005, p. 6).

Yet educational uses of technology for digital diplomacy and cultural exchange are slow to draw attention. Online and offline journals[21] dealing with digital diplomacy are currently dominated by Blockchain, Fake News, and CyberSecurity. According to Manor (2018),

> "[a]s is the case with other fields of diplomacy, contemporary studies of digital public diplomacy have also adopted a negative prism in which public diplomacy is reduced to a tool for contesting narratives, fighting disinformation through recruited networks and influencing the world views and behaviors of audiences" (para. 3).

In recent years a small number of articles addressing virtual exchange as a form of soft power have been published citing the potential of virtual exchange as a form of citizen diplomacy: "[v]irtual exchange is changing the how and who of exchange, and may well prove itself to be a viable

20. https://www.dw.com/en/fulbright-exchange-program-battles-white-house-antipathy/a-43008933

21. See for example https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/virtual-exchange-evolution-citizen-diplomacy

extension of public diplomacy, and a new means of building and exerting soft power in foreign affairs" (Helland, 2017, para. 3).

The term soft power is often used with positive connotations – usually by those wielding power, who see it as a tool for securing their influence overseas – by non-military means. Soft power was key in the rise and maintenance of the 19th-century British Empire, and also in the rise of the United States' power after the end of the second world war (Holm, 2016). Many international relations scholars claim that since the end of the Cold War soft power has come to be of even greater importance than hard power (Muedini, 2018). However, we could also look at education and soft power through the lens of postcolonialism (Andreotti & Souza, 2016) which is not so unapologetically celebratory about the wielding of power – whether 'hard' or 'soft'. With reference to the American context, Tayla Zemach-Bersin (2007) argues that internationalisation of higher education and study abroad programmes are intended to recuperate America's waning reputation due to the government's response to the World Trade Center attacks of 9/11 and claim to promote understanding and global citizenship. Yet, she highlights,

> "the discourse of study abroad surreptitiously reproduces the logic of colonialism, legitimizes American imperialist desires, and allows for the interests of U.S. foreign policy to be articulated through the specious rhetoric of global universality. Though presented with an appealing veneer of multicultural understanding and progressive global responsibility, the current discourse of study abroad is nationalistic, imperialistic, and political in nature" (Zemach-Bersin, 2007, p. 17).

Erasmus+ student mobility and now virtual exchange is somewhat less hegemonic in terms of soft power than exchange programmes promoted by institutions like Fulbright in the United States or the British Council in the United Kingdom, because it is based on principles of reciprocity and mutual exchange rather than a single hegemon driven by neoliberal markets or political imperatives. The European Union is an interdependent system in which no member state has the hard or the soft power to dominate all the others (Rose, 2005), though of course there are clearly power asymmetries. As regards its external relations, however, Europe's foreign policy is clearly Eurocentric and often accused of neo-colonial and/or neo-Orientalist orientations and representations (Dimitrovova & Kramsch, 2017; Pasture, 2018).

Student mobility has been a tool used to strengthen the sense of European identity and since its launch over 30 years ago, the Erasmus programme has proved to be one of the most popular European projects. The power of student mobility to increase young people's curiosity, develop an international mindset and equip them with transversal skills which support their employability was

recognised in the Erasmus Impact Study (Brandenburg et al., 2014) which had a stronger focus on employability skills than intercultural understanding. In 2015, the Erasmus+ programme expanded to neighbouring regions including the Southern Mediterranean. Though this has been welcomed by universities in both Europe and the Southern Mediterranean region, there has been concern as regards the distribution of the scholarships in the different South Mediterranean countries, the limited number of grants which does not match the number of requests, security risks for students on both sides, and finally the difficulty that youth from South Mediterranean countries have in obtaining visas from some European countries (Delpero, 2018).

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange seeks to build upon the symbolic capital of the Erasmus programme. As the European Commission announced in the press release, “Erasmus+, one of the EU's iconic and most successful programmes, today adds an online version to its mobility actions, to link more students and young people from European countries and the Southern neighbourhood of the EU” (European Commission, 2018a, n.p.). The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project is thus framed as a project which promotes not only internal, intra-European, but above all external relations with a specific area – Southern Mediterranean countries.

According to this press release, the project is intended “to promote intercultural dialogue and improve the skills of at least 25,000 young people through digital learning tools over the next two years” (European Commission, 2018a, n.p.). There is both a relational and an economic rationale behind the project. This duality between discourses which focus on economic and intercultural relations is found in many European policy documents, for example language-in-education policies (Liddicoat, 2013).

There is also a recognition that Erasmus has been somewhat limited in reach, particularly as regards the opportunities offered by Erasmus+ to young people outside of formal education. Virtual exchange is thus presented as a way to achieve greater accessibility and also to enhance social inclusion by involving young people from different social backgrounds. In his statement reported in the press release, Navracsics said

> "[w]hile a very successful programme, Erasmus+ is not always accessible to everyone. Through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange we will facilitate more contacts between people, reach youth from different social backgrounds and promote intercultural understanding. This online tool will connect more young people from the EU with their peers from other countries; it will build bridges and help develop skills such as critical thinking, media literacy, foreign languages and teamwork” (European Commission, 2018a, n.p.).

The document makes explicit reference to the Paris Declaration which calls on Member States to act in order to strengthen the role of intercultural dialogue in education and learning environments. This declaration came shortly after the so-called 'Paris Attacks', one of a series of terror attacks which occurred in Europe and which have led to the contestation, reconfiguring, and defence of notions of identity and belonging. Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange stems from a policy that aims to address what the European Commission sees as some of the main problems characterising today's societies in Europe and their relations with South Mediterranean countries, as is clearly stated in the legal and policy framework behind this project.

Educators often express discomfort when faced with the political dimension of education (Pennycook, 1994/2017) and virtual exchange (Helm, 2015), but it is important to remember that ALL education is political, even maintaining the status quo. As Pennycook (1994/2017) writes,

> "[n]o knowledge, no language and no pedagogy is ever neutral or apolitical. To teach critically, therefore, is to acknowledge the political nature of all education; it is not to take up some 'political' stance that stands in contradistinction to a 'neutral' position" (p. 301).

He argues for an understanding of politics as infused in everyday life as we struggle to make meanings for ourselves and others and calls for greater engagement with both local and global contexts, and with other cultural and political actors (Pennycook, 1994/2017).

Once we recognise the political dimension of our work, it becomes important to be aware of the kind of relationships it is that we are establishing, how we build these relations and the power dynamics that exist and are negotiated within them. Relations can be consciously and/or unconsciously coercive but they can also be based on principles of mutuality and reciprocity. They can be superficial and lead to banal essentialisms (Piller, 2016), reinforcing negative stereotypes and ethnocentric attitudes; but they can also be transformative, leading to a greater awareness of one's own situatedness and can open up the way to further search for encounters that will shape our knowledge and identities.

2.2. Linking research to policy and practice – the road ahead

In previous UNICollaboration conferences, keynote speakers have drawn on research and/or practice to make recommendations that we should keep in mind as we move forward and as our research informs policy makers.

Shamil Idriss (2014) from the Virtual Exchange Coalition called on us to act collectively for the common cause rather than pursuing our own agendas for the sake of moving forward the field of

virtual exchange. This collective behaviour has indeed borne fruits in the form of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project which brings together practitioners with experiences of different models of virtual exchange. This is leading to a cross-pollination of experience and collaboration in the experimentation of new models. For example, predominantly asynchronous telecollaborative models of virtual exchange designed by partner teachers are currently being integrated with small group synchronous dialogue sessions on a video conferencing platform with the support of Erasmus+ trained facilitators. This allows participants to interact with one another in a novel way and seeks to engage them in conversations which might not spontaneously occur between participants when left to their own devices. Despite the logistic challenges this presents, the feedback from students has thus far been largely positive and this approach will be further developed in the second year of this pilot project. Furthermore, the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange team will seek to engage with educators implementing these exchanges to understand the challenges they face, the opportunities they see in having their activity fall within the Erasmus framework, and also to seek collaborative and participatory research partnerships in order "to incorporate people and perspectives from as many contexts as possible in the very construction, development and promotion" (Bali & Sharma, 2014, n.p.) of these initiatives.

Mike Byram (2014) reminded us of the commodification of higher education and how language education, but also virtual exchange, I would argue, risks being servant to the market-driven imperatives of internationalisation. One of the reasons why there is interest now in virtual exchange is because it ticks all the right boxes in terms of 'internationalisation of higher education', in particular internationalisation of the curriculum (De Wit, 2016; Leask, 2015; Leask & De Wit, 2016). However virtual exchange, like internationalisation is a means to an end (De Wit, 2016) and too often we focus on the process itself, the technicalities of virtual exchange, rather than reflecting deeply on our aims.

Andreotti and Souza (2008) offer educators a reflective tool to help us reflect on this based on different ways of viewing the world. A modernist or Newtonian view sees it as a system with fixed rules and structures, based on universalist assumptions. To prepare young people for this kind of world education system would have students absorb specific knowledge and/or nurture those skills which will support the realisation of this society. In this type of world, interpretations that were not in line with this view would be either suppressed or ignored.

If, on the other hand, we see global society as diverse, inter-connected, multi-faceted, and in constant flux, if we see that transformations take place as different parts and systems interact with one another, we can understand that it is relations within and between systems which drive change and we need to navigate these systems and the relations within and between them. The diversity of this world

is represented by different meanings and interpretations, ways of seeing and knowing. Equipping young people for this type of world means exposing them to different models of thinking, strategies for establishing relationships, shifting positions and perspectives according to changing contexts, and being able to live with and navigate complexity and uncertainty. This entails unpredictability, moving out of one's comfort zones, and engaging with productive conflict.

Marie-Noelle Lamy (2014) alerted us to the importance of constantly questioning the assumptions on which our practice is based, for example the way we define culture, cultural identities, and communities. Virtual exchange should allow educators and participants to recognise the partiality, context dependency, and heterogeneity of our perspectives. The mutual engagement that we seek to foster should also be combined with tools of analysis that allow participants to take account of power relations between participants, the complexity of the process of construction of culture and identity, and an understanding of the social-historical processes and encounters that have contributed to these constructions (Bali & Sharma, 2014; Souza & Andreotti, 2009). We need to resist the temptation to make culture "an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords" (McLaren, 1992, quoted in bell hooks, 1994, p. 31).

Celèste Kinginger (2016) shared research about some of the factors which researchers have found to inhibit the potential of study abroad for student learning such as difficulty in connecting with local social networks, lack of exposure to discourses about 'foreigner identities', and reacting to this by 'positioning themselves within newly salient national identities'. She highlighted the potential of telecollaborative virtual exchange as a form of 'prior socialisation' to prepare students to face some of these issues. During this pilot year of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, several projects have been developed by educators precisely for this purpose. For example one exchange was designed on an already tested model (Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016) for students in Ireland and Spain preparing to go on Erasmus mobility. Also, an exchange was developed within the context of a youth worker project, Pathways to Leadership, which blends residential training with virtual exchange. Blended programmes that combine virtual exchange with study abroad are set to be an important component of the Commission's Erasmus 2021-2027, as has already been announced (European Commission, 2018b). At the same time, the value of virtual exchange in its own right as a complementary approach will continue to be experimented and its comparability to physical mobility in terms of learning outcomes will be explored (Van der Velden, Millner, & Van der Heijden, 2016), as well as the competencies (for example digital skills) that virtual exchange specifically addresses.

Andreas Müller-Hartmann (2016) reminded us that we should not lose sight of pedagogical goals in our virtual exchange activity, and David Little (2016) asked:

> “[w]ill emerging telecollaborative practice contribute to the evolution of a new learning-and-teaching dynamic that extends learners’ identity and their capacity for agentive behaviour, or will it simply add some extra limbs to a pedagogical tradition that has long been sclerotic?” (p. 54).

But what do we see as ‘agentive behaviour’?

In a globally connected world where rather than seek contact with groups of people who differ from us we tend to keep to our silos or ‘echo chambers’ (Paolini et al., 2018), we might conceive of ‘agentive behaviour’ as actively seeking contact with members of diverse groups, engaging with diversity in real settings. Researchers in the field of social psychology who have been exploring Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis have found a strong research base to support intergroup contact as “a way to improve troubled intergroup dynamics” (Paolini et al., 2018, p. 12). Whilst some studies have found that negative interactions can dampen interest and compromise future engagement, social psychologists have expressed greater concern in recent years as regards the phenomenon of ‘contact avoidance’ because they see this as one of the greatest challenges we are facing.

> “Why are intergroup friction and prejudiced attitudes so prominent at a time when intergroup contact can be an everyday experience for most global citizens? Why are rich opportunities for contact in our diverse world not producing the widespread, enduring and desirable integration outcomes predicted by intergroup contact research?” (Paolini et al., 2018, p. 3).

Clearly there are multiple possible answers to this complex question and a host of invisible barriers. Virtual exchange can be seen as a way of fostering positive contact in a safe environment that can fuel interest in further contact. In the post-exchange surveys carried out after the first Erasmus+ exchanges, it has been found that 86% of respondents are interested in further Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities, 82% of respondents report increased knowledge of the relationship between and across their societies, and 65% of respondents report increased self-awareness about stereotypes/biases they hold about another group[22]. Though this data consists of self assessment, it is important because it supports the argument that virtual exchange can enhance students’ capacity for this kind of agentive behaviour. Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, is currently being carried out[23].

22. https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_pl

23. Reports will be made available on the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange impact page https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_pl

As regards the teaching and research community, agentive behaviour might entail a similar approach, actively seeking contact and engaging with educators and researchers from different sociocultural contexts, academic disciplines and research approaches as well as different geographic areas. Paolini et al. (2018) also call on those in the research community seeking to encourage intergroup contact to consider how to generate "persuasive and engaging messages that counter the voices of segregation in politics, traditional media, and social media" (p. 12). Though it may take us out of the comfort zone of the research and practice community, engaging with decision-makers and the field of policy-making is an important way of doing this. At a time when right-wing politicians are opposing the extension of the Erasmus+ programme, in particular to North African countries[24] (Helm & Acconcia, 2018), increasing opportunities for intercultural exchange is fundamental. As Cummins (2000) writes, "the discourses of national and religious identity, and the historical myths that sustain them, risk implosion when contact and dialogue replace isolation and monologue" (p. 10).

Acknowledgements

Part of the research of this article was made possible by funding established under the contract Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges (contract number 2017-3620/01-01) with the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), financed by the European Union's budget. The pilot project is being carried out by the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange consortium composed by Search for Common Ground (SFCG), Sharing Perspectives Foundation (SPF), Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), UNIMED, Soliya, UNICollaboration, Kiron Open Higher Education (Kiron), and Migration Matters. The monitoring and evaluation of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges is a collaborative endeavour, and I wish to acknowledge in particular Bart van der Velden who is responsible for collating and analysing the quantitative data. The views reflected in this paper are the author's alone and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

I would like to thank the organisers of the 3rd UNICollaboration conference for the invitation to be keynote speaker, and the UNICollaboration community for the many enriching discussions we have about virtual exchange. I would also like to thank the two reviewers of this article for their comments and feedback.

24. https://www.corriere.it/scuola/universita/18_settembre_18/niente-erasmus-nord-africa-lega-si-oppone-scambi-studenti-9beb247a-bb34-11e8-bdaa-50b21d428469.shtml

References

Allport, G. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison Wesley.

Andreotti, V., & Souza, L. M. T. M. de. (2008). *Learning to read the world through other eyes*. Global Education.

Andreotti, V., & Souza. L. M. T. M. de. (2016). Critical education and postcolonialism. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of educational philosophy and theory*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_182-1

Argo, N., Idriss, S., & Fancy, M. (2009). *Media and intergroup relations: research on media and social change*. Soliya. https://www.soliya.net/sites/default/files/pdfs/SoliyaGuideEnglish.pdf

Bali, M., & Sharma, S. (2014). Bonds of difference: participation as inclusion. *Hybrid Pedagogy*. http://hybridpedagogy.org/bonds-difference-participation-inclusion/

Brandenburg, U., Berghoff, S., Taboadela, O., Bischof, L., Gajowniczek, J., Gehlke, A., & Hachmeister, C. (2014). *The Erasmus impact study: effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions*. European Union. https://doi.org/10.2766/75468

Byram, M. (2014, February). *Internationalisation or internationalism? Bringing intercultural citizenship to university language learning through international telecollaboration.* Keynote at 1st UNICollaboration conference: telecollaboration in university foreign language education. University of León, Spain. https://videos.unileon.es/video/638

Cairney, P. (2013). *Policy concepts in 1000 words: the advocacy coalition framework.* https://paulcairney.wordpress.com/2013/10/30/policy-concepts-in-1000-words-the-advocacy-coalition-framework/

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy. Bilingual children in the crossfire.* Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853596773

Cummins, J., &, Sayers, D. (1995). *Brave new schools: challenging cultural illiteracies through global learning networks*. St. Martin's Press.

De Wit, H. (2013). COIL—Virtual mobility without commercialisation. *University World News*, 274(1).

De Wit, H. (2016). Internationalisation and the role of online intercultural exchange. In T. Lewis & R. O'Dowd (Eds), *Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy, practice* (pp. 69-82). Routledge.

De Wit, H., Hunter, F., Howard, L., & Egron-Polak, E. (2015). *Internationalisation of higher education*. Study requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf

Delpero, C. (2018). Coscienza Europea. I giovani erasmiani crescono. *Eastwest.eu*. https://eastwest.eu/it/eastwest-78/coscienza-europea-i-giovani-erasmiani-crescono

Dimitrovova, B., & Kramsch, O. T. (2017). Decolonizing the spaces of European foreign policy: views from The Maghreb. *Interventions, 19*(6), 797-817. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2017.1348242

Elliot-Gower, S., & Hill, K. W. (2015). *The Soliya Connect Program: two institutions' experience with virtual intercultural communication*. Gower Georgia College. https://doi.org/10.21768/ejopa.v4i1.66

European Commission. (2018a, March 15). *Erasmus+ goes virtual.* Press release. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-1741_en.htm

European Commission. (2018b). Investing in people. Making Erasmus even better. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-may2018-erasmusplus_en_0.pdf

Giralt, M., & Jeanneau, C. (2016). Preparing student mobility through telecollaboration. In S. Jager, M. Kurek & B. O'Rourke (Eds), *New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education* (pp. 195-200). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.telecollab2016.507

Guth, S. (2016). Online intercultural exchange in Europe: state of the art and implications for the future. In T. Lewis & R. O'Dowd (Eds), *Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy, practice* (pp. 83-99). Routledge.

Guth, S., Helm, F., & O'Dowd, R. (2014). Telecollaborative foreign language networks in European Universities: a report on current attitudes and practices. *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature, 7*(4), 1-14.

Helland, E. (2017, September 4). Virtual exchange, an evolution in citizen diplomacy. *The Soft Powert 30*. https://softpower30.com/virtual-exchange-evolution-citizen-diplomacy/

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

Helm, F. (2018). *Emerging identities in virtual exchange*. Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.25.9782490057191

Helm, F., & Acconcia, G. (2018). Virtual exchange brings students and refugees closer. *Fair Observer: Make sense of the world.* https://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/refugee-crisis-policy-erasmus-virtual-exchange-europe-north-africa-news-10651/

Himelfarb, S. (2014). The real eHarmony: how young people meeting on the Internet might help build peace in some of the world's most volatile regions. https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/02/the-real-eharmony/

Himelfarb, S., & Idriss, S. (2011). *Exchange 2.0. Special report*. U.S. Institute of Peace. http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Exchange2.0.pdf

Holm, M. (2016). Soft power and empire. *The Encyclopedia of Empire*. Wiley Online Library. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118455074.wbeoe092

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Idriss, S. (2014, February). *Taking international education and exchange to scale*. Keynote at 1st UNICollaboration conference: telecollaboration in university foreign language education. University of León, Spain. https://videos.unileon.es/video/641

Kinginger, C. (2016). Telecollaboration and student mobility for language learning. In S. Jager, M. Kurek & B. O'Rourke (Eds), *New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education* (pp. 19-29). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.telecollab2016.487

Kockaert, H. J., & Steurs, F. (2014). *Handbook of terminology* (volume 1). John Benjamins.

Lamy, M. N. (2014, February). *Telecollaboration: what have we learnt?* Keynote at 1st UNICollaboration conference: telecollaboration in university foreign language education. University of León, Spain. https://videos.unileon.es/video/640

Leask, B. (2015). *Internationalization of the curriculum in context*. Routledge.

Leask, B., & De Wit, H. (2016). Reimagining the HE curriculum for the 21st century. *University World News Global Edition*, 438.

Liddicoat, A. (2013). *Language-in-education policies: the discursive construction of intercultural relations*. Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847699152

Little, D. (2016). Learner autonomy and telecollaborative language learning. In S. Jager, M. Kurek & B. O'Rourke (Eds), New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education (pp. 45-55). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.telecollab2016.489

Magi Educational Services. (1992). *Evaluation of the New York State/Moscow schools telecommunications project*. https://iearn.org/assets/general/NY_State_Moscow_Evaluation.pdf

Manor, I. (2018, April 12). An optimistic research agenda for digital public diplomacy, CPD blog. https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/optimistic-research-agenda-digital-public-diplomacy

McLaren, P. L. (1992). Critical multiculturalism and democratic schooling: an interview with Peter McLaren and Joe Kincheloe. *International Journal of Educational Reform, 1*(4), 392-405.

Muedini, F. (2018). Soft power. *International Relations.* http://internationalrelations.org/soft-power/

Müller-Hartmann, A. (2016). A task is a task is a task is a task... or is it? Researching telecollaborative teacher competence development – the need for more qualitative research. In S. Jager, M. Kurek & B. O'Rourke (Eds), *New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education* (pp. 31-43). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.telecollab2016.488

Nye, J. S. (1990). *Soft power*. Foreign Policy, No. 80, Twentieth Anniversary, (Autumn 1990) (pp. 153-171). https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580

Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: the means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.

O'Dowd, R. (2011). Online foreign language interaction: moving from the periphery to the core of foreign language education? *Language Teaching*, *44*(3), 368-380. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444810000194

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

Paolini, S., Harwood, J., Hewstone, M., & Neumann, D. L. (2018). Seeking and avoiding intergroup contact: future frontiers of research on building social integration. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328741781_Seeking_and_avoiding_intergroup_contact_Future_frontiers_of_research_on_building_social_integration

Pasture, P. (2018). The EC/EU between the art of forgetting and the Palimpsest of Empire. *European Review, 26*(3), 545-581. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798718000224

Pennycook, A. (1994/2017). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. Routledge.

Pettigrew, T. F., Tropp, L., Wagner, U., & Christ, O. (2011). Recent advances in intergroup contact theory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*(3), 271-280. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.03.001

Piller, I. (2016). *Linguistic diversity and social justice. An introduction to applied sociolinguistics*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199937240.001.0001

PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs. (2017). *Study on the feasibility of an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative*. Final Report. https://europa.eu/youth/sites/default/files/eyp/eve/attachments/final_report_study_on_the_feasibility_of_an_erasmus_virtual_exchange_initiative.pdf

Rizvi, F. (2008). Epistemic virtues and cosmopolitan learning. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 35*(1), 17-35. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03216873

Rose, R. (2005). Language, soft power and asymmetrical Internet communication. *Oxford Internet Institute, Research Report No. 7, April 2005.* https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1308501

Rubin, J., & Guth, S. (2015). Collaborative online international learning: an emerging format for internationalizing curricula. In A. Schultheis Moore & S. Simon (Eds), *Globally networked teaching in the humanities: theories and practice* (pp. 15-27). Routledge.

Sandre, A. (2017, Dec 28). 2017 in review: top 10 digital diplomacy moments. *Digital Diplomacy* https://medium.com/digital-diplomacy/2017-in-review-top-10-digital-diplomacy-moments-669909124710

Souza, L. M. T. M. de, & Andreotti, V. (2009). Culturalism, difference and pedagogy. Lessons from Indigenous education in Brazil. In J. Latvia & M. Moore (Eds), *Cross-cultural perspectives on policy and practice. Decolonizing community contexts* (pp. 72-86). Routledge.

Starke-Meyerring, D., & Wilson, M. (Eds). (2008). *Designing globally networked learning environments: visionary partnerships, policies, and pedagogies*. Sense Publishers.

Start, D., & Hovland, I. (2004). *Tools for policy impact: a handbook for researchers*. https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/194.pdf

Thorne, S. (2018, April). *From culture to 'culturing' in online intercultural exchange*. Keynote at the 3rd UNICollaboration conference telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship. Pedagogical University, Krakow, Poland. https://www.unicollaboration.org/index.php/krakow2018/

UNICollaboration. (2014). *Position paper on virtual exchange*. https://uni-collaboration.eu/node/996

Van der Velden, B., Millner, S., & Van der Heijden, C. (2016). Comparing the development of transversal skills between virtual and physical exchanges. In S. Jager, M. Kurek & B. O'Rourke (Eds), *New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education* (pp. 217-224). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.telecollab2016.510

Zemach-Bersin, T. (2007). Global citizenship and study abroad: its all about U.S. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices, 1*(2), 16-28.

UNICollaboration
Journal of VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

Helm, F. (2018). The long and winding road... Journal of Virtual Exchange, 1, 41-63. Research-publishing.net.
https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.3
Published online: 28 December 2018

Journal of Virtual Exchange (JVE) is an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal aimed at practitioners and researchers in the field known variously as virtual exchange, telecollaboration, or online intercultural exchange. It is the official journal of UniCollaboration (https://www.UniCollaboration.org/), the international academic organisation dedicated to supporting and promoting telecollaboration and virtual exchange in higher-level education.

Disclaimer. Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this article. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this article is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither UniCollaboration nor Research-publishing.net can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. Additionally, the publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice. Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material. Every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this article. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this article.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net

Noto fonts are open source. All Noto fonts are published under the SIL Open Font License, Version 1.1. Noto is a trademark of Google Inc. (https://www.google.com/get/noto/).

ISSN: 2647-4832 (online only)