

1 When more is less: unexpected challenges and benefits of telecollaboration

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Abstract

This article documents the changes undergone by a telecollaboration project between a Japanese university and a university in Romania. While the size of the project diminished with every passing year due to extrinsic and intrinsic causes, the quality of the exchanges improved. It became apparent that the main goals of the collaboration – improving cross-cultural understanding and increasing student self-awareness – were better served by reducing the number of tasks and allowing more time for reflection.

Keywords: cross-cultural understanding, self-awareness, institutional involvement, task.

1. Introduction

This article offers a candid account of three successive years of telecollaboration between Otaru University of Commerce, Japan (OUC), and Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania (TUB). After a promising start, the project – hailed by one of the first student participants as “a step towards the modern age in a bureaucratic university” and a “window to the world” – entered a process of reduction and simplification. This diminution was not due to loss of interest by the student participants or by the organizers, but by the overambitious structure of

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the project and by the asymmetrical burden it represented for the two institutions. Far from being detrimental to the project, the reduction proved beneficial in that it allowed more time for reflection and, thus, enhanced the cultural experience. This article will present the project, the factors that prompted the changes, and the lessons that can be drawn from this experience. Since the very small number of student participants makes it impossible to provide meaningful quantitative data, the article will focus on qualitative data: instructor observations and student testimony.

2. The project

The OUC-TUB project was initially designed around an OUC academic writing class and consisted of three units: (1) from presentation to essay, (2) from data collection to report, and (3) literature review. The course aimed to provide students with the tools needed for writing a graduation paper in English.

In the first year, virtual exchanges, both synchronous and asynchronous, took place at all stages throughout the three units. All the three types of interactions mentioned in [O'Dowd and Ware \(2009\)](#) were included: information exchange, comparison and analysis, and collaboration. In synchronous encounters, students watched each other's presentations and offered comments, together created survey questions, collected data, and discussed it, exchanged ideas on the article they had read, and reviewed each other's essays (for details see [Caluianu, 2018](#)).

In the second year of the partnership, the collaboration included only two units of the initial project and the Romanian students did not take part any longer in the essay writing activities. In the third year, the exchange was even more limited. It appears that, instead of growing, the project has been shrinking with every passing year. What prompted these changes?

The project was, from the start, modeled to answer the needs of the Japanese university. The telecollaboration was integrated with the OUC curriculum and

was recognized as one of the main activities of a Blended-Learning Project (BLP) funded by the Japanese government. As such, it was scheduled in a time slot that would permit face-to-face communication with a European country, and it benefitted from technical support from the BLP staff.

The situation was very different for the Romanian university where the collaboration had no official status and was merely tolerated. The activities were piggybacked onto various classes during the first two years and carried out on a voluntary basis during students' free time in the third year. Faculty efforts were not rewarded in any way, a state of affairs that led to loss of interest by some of the participants.

Differences between partners in telecollaboration are not something uncommon. Rodas-Pérez, Villamediana-González, Chala, and Rico (2018) discuss a project that started with an asymmetric partnership, much like the one between OUC and TUB, but which managed to overcome the differences and ended up with a balanced relationship. The difference between that case and the one under discussion is the existence of an official relationship between the universities involved. Without the framework provided by an official inter-university agreement, the asymmetry between the two universities was difficult to resolve.

However, the main reason behind the gradual shrinking of the project was that the initial plan was too ambitious. The plan imposed a fast-paced rhythm and did not set aside time for reflection and for exploration. The students had to complete numerous tasks: making presentations, designing surveys, reading articles, writing essays, and providing peer reviews. This pace was accepted without complaint by the Japanese students but placed a heavy burden on the Romanian partners, who were used to a different workload in class, and contributed to their instructor's decision to quit the project. What is more, in this maelstrom of activities, there was little time left for dwelling on cultural differences or comparing communicative styles. This led to the need to eliminate some of the activities, which ended up adding depth to the collaboration.

3. Discussion: changes and consequences

As mentioned above, the changes to the initial project were forced rather than implemented by choice, yet, once in place they proved advantageous. In the first year, the semester ended and, although the students were asked to reflect on their experience and give feedback through a questionnaire, there was no time left to discuss their answers and to analyze the experience. The student feedback, though positive, was vague. This is particularly true with respect to the central piece of the project: intercultural communication.

“I think this class was more effective at the point of knowing different cultures and communicating with foreign people” (Year 1 Student 1, Caluianu, 2018, p. 62).

Several students mentioned ‘knowing a different culture’ as one of the best points of the class, yet it is unclear what that means and if it was more than an attempt to give the expected response.

The second year activities were more one-sided and offered less time for interaction. At the same time, by reducing the number of activities, it became possible to take more time for reflection. The Japanese students were asked to write an essay at the end of the semester, discussing the value of telecollaboration as a teaching instrument in the context of Japanese education. The essays offered an interesting culturally situated assessment of telecollaboration, but also some unexpected critical reactions: they articulated clearly their need for pre-exchange cultural training and for a more evenly-paced rhythm. The essays offered an insight into students’ understanding of their place in the world and showed a higher degree of self-awareness than expected:

“One of [the] barriers to practical telecollaboration is ‘enryo’ of Japanese students. [...] ‘Enryo means thinking ahead before a situation develops, taking fully into account the other person, and then refraining from action based on the circumstance’ (Yamakuse, 2011). [...] The Japanese lose the chance to speak out on issues on the international

stage due to their tendency towards enryo. Such kinds of situations can be occurred while trying telecollaboration between Japanese students and the students in other western countries. If Japanese students [show] the attitude of ‘enryo’ and ask nothing, and just waiting for questions from foreign students, the foreign students can’t get information from the Japanese students. Also, Japanese students can’t get information from foreign students. This may not [be] beneficial for each and not very interactive. So, before carrying out lectures or class[es] with telecollaboration, we have to make students be more active enough to ask what they want to know” (Year 2 Student 1, [Caluianu, 2018](#), p. 67).

“[A]s always, we took time and hesitated to answer questions from the Brasov side [...], partly because we had to figure out what was our opinion on matters ‘as a group’. One cannot just say whatever he/she thinks as a response or opinion of the group, and this is just as [Yamakuse \(2011\)](#) points out in the chapter [on] ‘harmony’, saying that the Japanese value ‘is placed on understanding those with whom one must interact and on taking action in groups” (Year 2 Student 2, [Caluianu, 2018](#), p. 63).

“On top of that, the subject matter was cultural[ly different], so we, as a small group of [...] five members, needed to pay extra caution to decide the answer which should be able to represent the general opinion of Japanese people. We, however, would never be able to have more natural, smooth conversations if we tried to make ‘agreement[s]’ carefully on every single question asked by the other group, so students and teachers should be encouraged to be aware of that” (Year 2 Student 2).

These remarks are interesting because they put in a different perspective two characteristics of Japanese students that are frequently referred to critically by Western instructors: the Japanese shyness and the long silences. It is also interesting to note that, while in the case of ‘enryo’/shyness, the student feels the need for coaching in order to move closer to the Western standard; in the case of ‘harmony’, the student does not propose to compromise and adopt the

Western standard. Instead, the student highlights the feelings of responsibility which justify the long silences and argues for a more equitable use of time. The new structure of the project offered the instructor a deeper understanding and appreciation for the students. Qualities previously taken for granted were recognized (see [Burada, 2018](#)), and apparent shortcomings appeared in a more favorable light, prompting a more student-centered organization of the collaboration.

One of the main goals of the project was to foster cultural self-awareness through exposure to a different culture. The initial curriculum was designed with the purpose of providing the widest possible range of opportunities for intercultural exchange. The exchanges were carefully planned and scheduled by the instructors, the activities were carried out smoothly and without incident. The project seemed to be very successful until comparison with the streamlined version of the second year revealed some flaws in its design. The activity-rich initial design was too product-oriented and offered too little opportunity for reflection. Although the students were presented with numerous culturally significant situations and materials, they were not given any guidelines for interpreting them. The tightly run, teacher-led schedule proceeded without incidents but also without opportunities for unscripted exchanges. It became clear that, for the project to achieve its goal, the focus of the collaboration should shift from task completion to reflection and discussion of the exchange process. The participants in the exchange should be provided with some cultural guidelines, and the ‘clash of cultural fault lines’ discussed in [Beltz \(2002\)](#) should be encouraged.

4. Conclusions

The fate of the OUC-TUB project indicates that a collaboration may fall short of its main goals even when it is carefully planned and enthusiastically carried out: the very complexity of the design may harm a project. As the project was forced to reduce its size, it became clear that excessive focus on the tasks may put the goals in jeopardy. Although cultural self-awareness seems to grow

automatically once learners from different cultures come into contact, a large number of collaborative activities and a strong online presence do not guarantee deeper cross-cultural understanding if time and attention are not set aside for cross-cultural reflection.

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