

4 Challenges of the transatlantic cross-disciplinary ENVOIE-UFRUG project

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Abstract

This paper reports upon the interdisciplinary exchange between a group of students at the University of Groningen (UG), The Netherlands, enrolled in a course on Hispanic literature and a group of students at the University of La Frontera (UFRO), Chile, enrolled in a course on journalism. The study focusses on three challenges: first, the way sociopolitical factors, i.e. a student strike, can affect an exchange; second, how to integrate learning goals from two disciplines in one Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE); and third, how to ensure reciprocity and interdependence between students. After describing how we addressed these challenges, we evaluate to what extent we have been successful at doing this. Departing from student and teacher surveys and field observations, we will show how the contextual constraints at socio-political, course, teacher, and learner level influenced the development of this OIE. Finally, we summarise the main lessons learned and in the conclusions we draw new lines for further improvement and research.

Keywords: interdisciplinary OIE, learning outcomes, teacher competences, reciprocity, interdependence.

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How to cite this chapter: Albá Duran, J., & Oggel, G. (2019). Challenges of the transatlantic cross-disciplinary ENVOIE-UFRUG project. In A. Turula, M. Kurek & T. Lewis (Eds), *Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship* (pp. 31-39). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.35.937>

1. Introduction

After having learnt from our experience with a similar interdisciplinary project³, in the design phase of the ENVOIE-UFRUG project⁴ involving first year Bachelor of Arts (BA) journalism students in Chile (introductory course on the fundamentals of social science) and second year European languages and cultures students (course on Hispanic culture and literature) in The Netherlands, we continued to develop solutions to two main challenges. First, how to make students with different learning objectives work together (Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016, p. 149) and, second, how to ensure that the activities generate interdependence between students to reach a common goal (Kittle & Hicks, 2009).

Throughout the exchange, additional challenges, such as the student strike, interfered in the process. After a brief description of the settings and pedagogical design, we report on the outcomes of the OIE and discuss to what extent we managed to overcome the mentioned issues. Lastly, we will establish points for improvement and draw some conclusions for future OIEs.

2. Project description

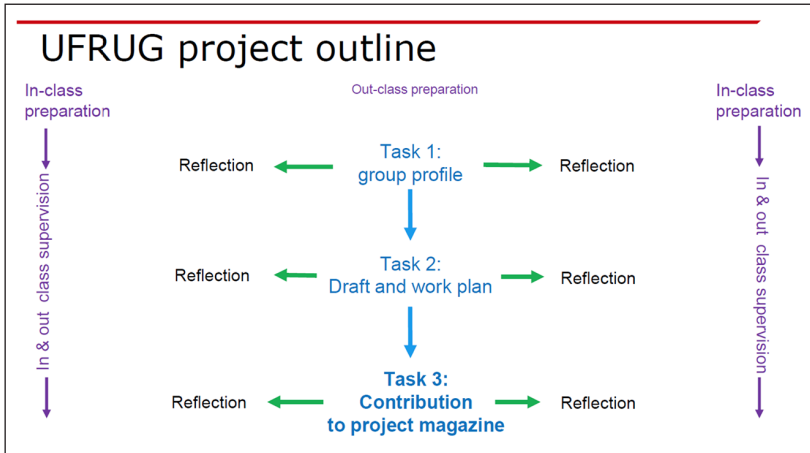
The exchange took eight weeks (April 16th to June 8th 2018). Thirteen student groups (at least two from each university) carried out three activities to collaboratively write an article for a joint intercultural magazine. For each activity they had to have at least one online meeting on a videoconferencing tool of their choice. The first activity was an icebreaker to get to know each other and write a team profile together in Padlet. The second served to write a proposal

3. The RUG-UB interdisciplinary telecollaboration project (2013-2017) was set up for second year students of Spanish from the department of the BA of European languages and cultures at the University of Groningen (RUG), and students from the Master of teaching Spanish as a second language from the University of Barcelona (UB); <http://uni-collaboration.eu/node/1026>.

4. The UFRUG project (Temuco - Groningen) is part of the umbrella project ENVOIE, funded by the University of Groningen, which has developed several OIEs between the RUG and other universities around the world and across disciplines; <https://www.rug.nl/let/organization/diensten-en-voorzieningen/ictol/projecten/envoie/?lang=en>.

and give peer feedback, and the third to collaboratively write the article using Google Docs (see [Figure 1](#) for the project outline).

Figure 1. UFRUG project outline



The task instructions included the learning goals of the project, which were linked to those of the courses. Students had to negotiate the topic of the article with their transatlantic partners synthesising disciplines.

Regarding reciprocity, we tried to ensure personal involvement, equal participation, and interdependence in the activities by using different dynamics: in the icebreaker by having them search for common interests, and in the next activities by prompting negotiation of content and form. In the feedback phase, students had to use their partners' comments to improve their article proposal. Additionally, the Chilean students had to provide linguistic feedback to students of Spanish as L2.

These requirements were mentioned in the instructions and assessed through questions about teamwork, team dynamics, and task content through a self-evaluation questionnaire that students completed in a Google Form after each activity.

Within the framework of ENVOIE, several team members made this project possible. Additionally to the teachers of the courses participating in the exchange, two experienced teachers in OIE (the authors of this article) had the role of task co-developers and pedagogic advisors. The tasks, group dynamics, and the final product of the OIE were agreed upon all together, but the co-developers/advisors designed most materials. The project manager and his team submitted evaluation surveys to participants at the end of the project.

3. Results

Besides the everyday communication with teachers and students and general observations, the final survey served as the main data source for a systematic analysis of the exchange (see [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#)), including a five point Likert scale and optional open questions. As a complementary source, the three self assessments were taken into account to see how students did or did not work together. In the magazine articles, interdisciplinarity and reciprocity were considered, i.e. (lack of) integration of topics from both disciplines and cultures, and (lack of) cohesion and coherence between parts. The data analysis shows how the development/implementation of this OIE was influenced by the challenges at socio-political, course, teacher, and learner levels.

3.1. Challenge 1: student strike

Between May 13th and July 5th there was a student strike at UFRO that paralysed all lectures and overlapped with half of the OIE. Nonetheless, the Chilean group continued participating and the UFRO teachers organised supervision meetings with them. In the survey, some UG students mention the strike as a possible reason for difficulties of communication between the groups.

3.2. Challenge 2: interdisciplinarity

As stated above, one of the main challenges was to make sure that students from the different disciplines would equally benefit from the project in terms of

course related content and learning outcomes. As shown in [Table 1](#), UG students disagree with the statements that the OIE contributed to a better understanding of the course content and that it was well integrated in the course. UFRO students are neutral about the first statement but agree with the other two.

The content of the articles in the magazine, such as *La música como elemento transcultural en los Países Bajos y Chile* and *Contrastes de la cultura gastronómica de Chile y Holanda*, shows that students did make an effort to synthesise different cultural perspectives but did not elaborate on academic, course related content.

Table 1. Ratings for Question (Q) 14: respondents' rate UG: 62.5% (20 out of 32); respondents' rate UFRO: 51.6% (16 out of 31)

| | Q14.1 The OIE contributed to a better understanding of the course | | Q14.9 The OIE was well-integrated in the course | | Q14.8 The learning goals of the OIE for this course were clear | |
|---------------------|---|----------|---|----------|--|----------|
| | UG (%) | UFRO (%) | UG (%) | UFRO (%) | UG (%) | UFRO (%) |
| Completely disagree | 45 | 6.25 | 35 | 0 | 20 | 0 |
| Somewhat disagree | 15 | 18.75 | 10 | 6.25 | 5 | 25 |
| Neutral | 15 | 50 | 25 | 12.50 | 35 | 6.25 |
| Somewhat agree | 20 | 25 | 25 | 37.50 | 20 | 37.50 |
| Completely agree | 5 | 0 | 5 | 43.75 | 20 | 31.25 |

3.3. Challenge 3: reciprocity and autonomy

Another challenge of the interdisciplinary character of this OIE was to design the activities in such a way that students would need the other group's expertise and collaboration to fulfill the task together. As shown in [Table 2](#), the OIE contributed to students' ability to collaborate online and to learn autonomously. However, contrasting these results with students' reflection reports, we see that out of 13 groups, only two report having managed to collaborate without having

problems of reciprocity. Except for two UFRO students, all problems were claimed by UG students saying that UFRO peers did not contribute enough. In fact, many groups did not meet the deadlines set but teachers did not always monitor this. Furthermore, the lack of coherence and differences in style and language of the articles, show that students worked mostly individually instead of collaboratively.

Table 2. Ratings from general survey Question (Q)14

| | Q14.4 The OIE contributed to my ability to collaborate with others online | | Q14.3 The OIE provided an environment for active learning (you were in charge of your learning and negotiated actions with your partner) | |
|---------------------|--|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| | UG (%) | UFRO (%) | UG (%) | UFRO (%) |
| Completely disagree | 5 | 25 | 10 | 0 |
| Somewhat disagree | 25 | 0 | 10 | 6.25 |
| Neutral | 20 | 6.25 | 15 | 6.25 |
| Somewhat agree | 35 | 37.50 | 30 | 37.50 |
| Completely agree | 15 | 50 | 35 | 50 |

Despite the careful design of the activities, the almost overall negative evaluation by UG students show that (1) the OIE did not substantially contribute to students achieving the learning objectives of their respective courses, and (2) the students did not participate equally in the activities.

The generally more positive evaluation by UFRO (teachers and students) may indicate that they were not fully aware of the complexity of the OIE and the many different aspects of it that required their attention. UFRO students might have been less critical for being first years.

4. Discussion and lessons learned

In this section we will discuss the challenges faced and give suggestions on how to deal with them in a future edition of this project.

4.1. Challenge 1: strike

According to the Chilean teachers, student strikes at the UFRO usually take place in the spring semester. For this reason and provided that courses and academic calendars match, it is recommended to schedule a next edition in the autumn semester.

4.2. Challenge 2: interdisciplinarity

An introductory course of journalism dealing with general concepts of social sciences and an advanced course on literature seem to have lacked sufficient points in common. For a next edition, we should make sure to find courses that have more synergies in terms of subject matter and learning outcomes. At the same time we should align the learning outcomes and tasks of the OIE (enhancement of intercultural and transversal skills) better with the learning outcomes of the courses.

4.3. Challenge 3: reciprocity and autonomy

The differences in learner autonomy between first and second year students might have negatively influenced the collaboration. On top of this, the Chilean teachers of the course did not receive the proper training to be prepared to give the students the guidance they needed. The fact that it was mostly the task co-designers and pedagogical advisors who created and implemented the tasks, made the teachers feel a little detached from the project. For the teachers at UFRO, this was even more the case due to the strike and also because they could not count on the support of the UG based advisors for the in-class activities (Belz, 2001). As a consequence, there was a lack of teacher monitoring of students during the implementation phase of the OIE (Melchor-Couto & Jauregi, 2016). The complexity of the tasks also might have required a too high level of student autonomy and OIE-related teacher competences. Therefore, for a next edition, it is recommended to first carry out a thorough needs analysis at both student and teacher levels before planning and developing the OIE. Full training and support should be offered to the

teachers responsible for the courses and they should be the ones who design and implement the project. Finally, students should be made aware of each other's needs and learning goals to be achieved so that they can also help each other in the learning process.

5. Conclusion

This paper shows that for this interdisciplinary OIE to be successful in a next edition, special attention needs to be given to a number of intertwined challenges at socio-political, institutional, course, teacher, and learner levels. Virtual exchange teacher trainings like the ones offered through EVE⁵ and EVOLVE⁶ seem to be crucial. If teachers lack competences to properly guide students, student performances will automatically diminish.

The challenges which are inherent to the interdisciplinary character of the exchange need further research to be solved: Is it possible to link any course to any other one? How do we make sure each group achieves the courses' and OIEs learning outcomes? For these (and other) questions to be answered we believe the principles of reciprocity and autonomy as defined by [Little and Brammerts \(1996\)](#) for language tandems, need to be reframed not only at student level but also at institutional and teacher level, taking into account all the factors involved.

Acknowledgements

We thank Dr Sake Jager for his unconditional support as project manager and colleague. Our deepest gratitude also goes to all the teachers and students who made this OIE possible.

5. Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (EVE) training programmes: https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/activities_en

6. Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (EVOLVE) training programme: <https://evolve-erasmus.eu/training/>

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

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Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship
Edited by Anna Turula, Malgorzata Kurek, and Tim Lewis

Publication date: 2019/07/02

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Cover illustration by © Julien Eichinger - Adobe Stock.com
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-42-9 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-43-6 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-41-2 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, UK: British Library.
Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juillet 2019.
