8 Gamifying intercultural telecollaboration tasks for pre-mobility students

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Abstract

At a recent TeCoLa[3] project conference, Colpaert (2017) declared: "there is not enough evidence to suggest that technology has a direct effect on learning, not even virtual worlds. No, not even games… My hypothesis is… that the added value of technology depends on the designs of your learning environment on the one hand… and what I will talk about on task design on the other". This position paper argues that gamification may be effectively employed in engaging students' participation in pre-mobility preparation telecollaborative programmes, paying particular attention to environment and task design. Such preparation involves carrying out telecollaborative tasks with international partners and peers. Participation is voluntary and one of the biggest challenges in completing the set tasks results from the initial mismatch or 'non-fit' of pair partners. We present issues and ideas surrounding the possible gamification of task design in order to motivate students, to build an 'expectancy-value framework' (Dörnyei, 1998), and to remain engaged throughout the pre-mobility telecollaborative project.

Keywords: gamification, telecollaboration, motivation, tasks, pre-mobility students.

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3. Pedagogical Differentiation through Telecollaboration and Gaming for Intercultural and Content Integrated Language Teaching

1.   Introduction

For more than 30 years, university students have participated in Study Abroad (SA) programmes as part of Erasmus or Erasmus+ initiatives. Availing of the SA opportunity has been very beneficial for undergraduate students. However, as mentioned elsewhere, some researchers, such as Byram and Dervin (2009), have shown that

> "while it is crucial to increase the opportunities for students to go abroad, it is erroneous to assume that students will automatically benefit from [their SA. Their research] highlights that it is [imperative] to prepare students for the mobility period so that they can fully benefit from their stay" (Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016, p. 2782).

Participating in telecollaboration projects that match students from the country where they are going to be travelling has been proven to be effective preparation for the period abroad (Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016). Nevertheless, the inclusion of such practices as part of the compulsory activities that students need to perform on their academic programmes could be difficult, and in many situations, they must be offered on a voluntary basis. For many years, the Intercultural Telecollaborative Language Learning (I-Tell) project, aimed at preparing students for their SA, has worked successfully in the University of Limerick. However, there have been some challenges: mismatch and asymmetries between the partners in terms of knowledge and needs, low motivation because of a lack of institutional reward, and issues with time management. As a result, there have been some low and non-completion rates, resulting in the students not maximising the opportunity to prepare better for their mobility programmes.

In this position paper, we propose gamifying the tasks that students must carry out during their Virtual Exchange (VE) in order to try to improve their engagement and persistence in completing the project. After justifying why we should gamify telecollaborative tasks, we provide an example of how this could be done.

2.   Brief literature review on gamification

Gamification has been defined as the use of game design elements in non-game contexts, and is proven to be effective in motivating behavioural change and engaging learners to a high level (Buckley et al., 2018). In viewing game elements as "motivational affordances" (Deterding, 2011, p. 2), and establishing the relationship between these elements and motivational affordances, it is our contention that gamification may be successfully applied to improving the VE preparation tasks amongst would-be SA students.

It is clear that gamers may become highly engaged in their tasks and this has inevitably brought attention from other domains, including education. Everyday examples of this include organisations seeking to promote social and work changes (Oprescu, Jones, & Katsikitis, 2014) or groups creating games where players are solving an underlying problem – which is the essence of problem based learning – or through the creation of multifarious types of gamified educational websites (for many ideas on this topic, see Kapp, 2012).

Ferrara (2013) has argued that games "are able to contain and communicate persuasive messages" (p, 294). Whilst some researchers may see this as a negative phenomenon, where innocent game players are exploited by gamification designers (Bogost, 2011; Tulloch, 2014), Gee (2016) has argued that persuasion can be used for positive behavioural change as well. However, since its introduction, gamification has been dismissed as "pointsification", derided as "exploitationware", and labelled as an ephemeral "fad" (Ferrara, 2013, p. 289). Serious and professional game designers and researchers have tried to remove themselves from what they regard as simplistic renditions of elements that can be so very powerful in well-designed games. Alternatively, while many of these criticisms are invariably true, it would appear that something of a mind shift has transpired in the attitudes of game designers towards this concept. As "[g]amification is widely employed and disseminated in the corporate context" (Costa, Aparicio, Aparicio, & Aparicio, 2017, p. 64), we should be making a more systematic approach in integrating proven aspects of gamification. This approach may build upon and move beyond badges

(Griggio, 2018) and "soft certification" (Hauck & MacKinnon, 2016, p. 209), and seek to imitate and extend ambitious projects such as those delivered by Abruquah (2017). In doing so, we recognise the multifarious activities that occur within VE programmes, and it would be inappropriate for us to be prescriptive in our approach and with the several examples that we tentatively offer.

3.   The why and how of gamified telecollaborative tasks

Our proposals for gamifying telecollaborative tasks are based on VE experience gathered over a four year period (2013-2017), with approximately 15 specialist and non-specialist language students per year participating. The participants consisted of students learning Spanish at the University of Limerick, Ireland, who went to Spain on Erasmus or work placements in Year 3, Semester 1 of their course. They were paired with students from the University of León and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in Year 2, Semester 1. During the VE, all students had to conduct a series of telecollaborative tasks covering a range of intercultural topics (*introduction and the home university*; *finding out about the host country*; *expectations about living abroad*; *comparing university life and academic systems in the two countries*) during a period of eight weeks in the semester prior to their SA. The participants are advised to have two weekly exchanges with their international partner using e-mail or video-conferencing.

All participants had as intrinsic motivation the fact that they were going on Erasmus. However, that motivation was not enough to keep them engaged when mismatching or other challenges arose and sometimes they did not finalise the exchanges. A possible solution to help the more challenged students is to gamify the telecollaborative tasks. Our hypothesis is that in creating an 'expectancy-value framework' (Dörnyei, 1998), the extrinsic motivation emerging from the gamified tasks will engage students to the point that their motivation is re-ignited and helps them to complete all the tasks.

Our approach is to invite the students themselves to become 'game designers'. This consists of giving some suggestions of video game genres, e.g. adventure, role playing games, persuasive games, detective, and mini quests. These choices importantly introduce the idea of fun, creativity, freedom, collaboration, and the sense of community.

The task for the students is to be able to gamify the VE tasks. They will bring their experiences of gameplay from other games, digital or not, compose, and propose what *they* would consider to be authentic tasks for their peers, in negotiation with their facilitators.

We believe that the engagement will occur when students get involved in the game design (see Colpaert, 2017) and start mutually exploring, getting to know their virtual partner, their host, and local country. Our suggestions and examples about gamifying the telecollaborative tasks used in the VE I-Tell project would be based on our pedagogical practices and experience. These practices include working in the target language, reflecting on the target culture and completing appropriate tasks in reciprocal preparation for the SA (for a detailed description, see Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016). As a proposed example acting as an icebreaker exercise, the students might create an avatar to introduce themselves and get to know their partners. The students could become digital sojourners and collaboratively navigate a virtual world (e.g. Second Life) to discover the virtual partner university and its local culture. We will offer them tips, tricks, and gifting examples for them to develop and exploit in their gamified experience. Additional 'gamifiable' tasks could be and indeed should be identified by both students and facilitators. These tasks would inevitably be localised to their own VE environments. There are already multiple examples of task-based activities that use game elements in different language learning environments which could easily be incorporated into VEs. As a possible starting point we would recommend Purushotma, Thorne, and Wheatley's (2009) '10 Key Principles for Designing Video Games for Foreign Language Learning'. Finally, it would be important to introduce an informal sense of fun, allowing creativity to flow when students are creating their own tasks. Collaboration amongst the VE participants is key here.

4.   Conclusion

In response to Colpaert's (2017) statement, we are proposing to flip the task and ask the students to use gaming elements and activities typically found in gaming to accomplish their VE tasks. This allows them to take ownership of the learning and exchange process, and to apply existing skills and knowledge whilst experiencing a mutually beneficial learning environment, maintaining their motivation and preparing effectively for their SA. The potential pitfalls could be many, and we should welcome and learn from them, of course, but this approach would attempt to introduce a greater investment from participants. When they invest their time, energy, and creativity and engage with the possible gamifiable elements, then the journey must surely be worth the risk. They may fail, but in gaming, as in learning, they may try again; "fail again, fail better" (Smith & Henriksen, 2016, p. 6).

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