

17 Integrating Soliya's Connect programmes into a language course and into a liberal arts and sciences degree

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Abstract

This chapter presents how I integrated Virtual Exchange (VE) programmes delivered by Soliya in two courses at an international undergraduate liberal arts and sciences college. In both cases the VE programme was fully integrated in the courses as a graded element. The students of beginner Italian participated in the four-week long Connect Express. While liking the experience, they found that the VE was still too disconnected from their aim of learning a language. The students of Intercultural Communication (IC) participated in the eight-week long Connect Global. For them, the success of the experience was linked to the group composition and the English proficiency level of participants.

Keywords: language education, intercultural communication, teacher's role, pedagogy, dialogue, reflective work.

1. Context

University College Utrecht (UCU) provides English-language liberal arts and sciences undergraduate education in the Netherlands and it is part of Utrecht University, a large research university. UCU is a residential college located

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on a campus which is home to 750 students with 70 different nationalities, although the vast majority have the Dutch nationality or that of a European country. Students learn to think critically and to employ multiple perspectives by composing their own multidisciplinary curriculum combining courses from disciplines taught in the three departments and interdisciplinary courses. Because of this system, courses are not linked to a specific study year: course admission is regulated by a set of prerequisites. Class size is small, and classes are usually composed of students with different academic backgrounds and interests, and who are at different stages of their study programme. This mix is enriching for class discussion and peer-learning, albeit often challenging for instructors, who need to cater for very diverse needs and knowledge levels. The students who participated in the VEs presented in this chapter took either my beginner Italian course to fulfil their language and culture requirement, or my IC course as an elective.

2. Aims and description of the project

According to the educational vision of UCU (n.d.), “qualities fostered at the college not only enable personal growth and professional advancement, but also prepare our students to fulfil their role as citizens, enabling them to serve others” (p. 2). Several UCU graduates aspire to working in an international environment where they can make a difference, as they often formulate it themselves. It is thus paramount that they learn to have a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others around the world and practise cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration within and outside their educational setting. Soliya’s VE programmes, aimed at enhancing communication and improving attitudes toward difference, seemed a meaningful tool to foster the qualities we value in our graduates, providing the students with experiences in a safe environment. Soliya is an international non-profit organisation headquartered in New York. Its mission is “to prepare rising generations to approach differences constructively and lead with empathy, in order to thrive in an interconnected world”².

2. <https://www.soliya.net/about/about-us>

The 11 students of my beginner Italian course participated in the four-week long *Connect Express*, which entailed one synchronous session of two hours per week in groups of ten to 12 students. The focus of this programme is communication in the digital world, through the lens of identity (including contextual salience of certain aspects of identity, and issues of identity threat). In the course guide, I explained the relevance of the VE by stating that *Connect Express* encourages thoughtful discourse in a digital society and explores how identity constructs and assumed archetypes influence engagement across cultural and continental divides.

Further, I explained that while only few participants in the VE would come from Italy, through participating in this exchange, students would further develop awareness of, and a critical stance on their own beliefs and attitudes. These two capabilities are important learning outcomes of the course, delivering on UCU's (n.d.) educational vision:

“[s]harply developed thinking skills go hand in hand with critical self-reflection and an eagerness to understand the positions of others. In this way each student comes to discern for him or herself which intellectual and personal aims are truly worth pursuing” (p. 1).

The 26 students of my IC course participated in the eight-week long *Connect Global* programme, which includes 16 hours of synchronous communication, complemented by ten hours to complete asynchronous assignments, which include two sets of readings, a group project, and a final reflective journal. This programme is designed to provide young adults with the opportunity to establish a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others around the world on important socio-political issues and develop competences such as critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, and collaborative problem-solving. The dialogues and projects of the VE would complement class activities such as student-led discussions, case presentations, and the critical analysis of (social) media. Class activities were aimed at developing students' awareness of their own values, norms, and biases, and preparing them for engaging with cultural others through the VE project.

3. Activities and tools

In both programmes, Soliya places participants from over 200 educational organisations in the Middle East, North Africa, North America, and Europe in groups of eight to 12 peers, considering the availability each student indicated and the time zone in which they live. Each week, students meet with their group members and facilitators in virtual meeting rooms on Soliya's video conferencing platform. The platform has a round-table design, break-out rooms, group and bilateral private chat, social rooms for non-facilitated dialogue, and options for asynchronous interaction.

Before the programmes start, students are asked to run a technical test. They also participate in a short online orientation and are provided with detailed information about the programme and expectations. Programme implementers (the instructors) receive implementation manuals detailing weekly topics and assignments and advice on how to integrate the programme in their course and how to spark reflection on the programme in class sessions.

Each group is supported by facilitators trained in cross-cultural dialogue, so they can guide participants' reflections on the learning process and help them navigate through interpersonal dynamics. They support the groups through a staged group process: orientation, polite moderation, learning through difference, sincere transformation, forward looking brainstorming, and activation.

The synchronous group sessions offer a combination of planned activities and discussions on topics chosen by the participants. To ensure student commitment and participation in all components of the programmes, Soliya recommends making attendance compulsory by either offering it as a graded part of an academic course or by creating a compelling incentive structure to ensure that students will fully commit to all the elements. I chose to make the VE a graded part of my courses.

Finally, implementers receive support in the form of several types of reports:

- weekly attendance reports of each participant with absences or lateness;
- weekly reports with information about the issues that were discussed the previous week, and the topics that would be discussed the week after. These reports focus on the specific areas where there was extensive debate or discussion, so that teachers can pursue these topics in offline class discussions;
- reminders of important students' deadlines for assignments; and
- individual student performance reports.

Those reports, completed by the group facilitators, are short and provide quantitative assessments of each student in their respective groups. Students are rated on level of participation in the dialogue sessions, level of engagement with their peers and in the group sessions, the ability to practise constructive cross-cultural communication, positive contribution to the discussion and the group dynamics, and finally, their language ability. This information, together with the attendance report, helped me assess my students' performances in their dialogue groups and assign a grade based on that.

For the eight-week Connect Global programme, Soliya provided students with a list of goals for each week and indicated some activities and topics that are required over the eight weeks, to create consistency from group to group. Prior to the first session, students read two articles dealing with global and social challenges and reflected on what they consider the most important social and global challenge. We discussed these articles in class as well in advance, so that I could check that all students had engaged with the resources. The same happened for the second set of readings, which dealt with IC. Early in the programme, each group did an analysis of what they saw as the most pressing global challenges and social issues in the world today. Then, over the course of the semester, they explored those key issues collaboratively. As such, every

group's discussion took a slightly different path, based on the areas of interest of the students in that group, and their joint diagnosis of the global and social challenges.

During the semester, students also examined the process of dialogue, to build upon their capacity to engage with differences constructively. Other topics explored were identity, culture and stereotypes, values and social norms, life experiences and world view, youth empowerment and activation, and any topic important to the participants. In the final session, the focus was on sharing participants' visions for the future and brainstorming together on how they can make a difference – individually and collectively: how to become change-makers.

Throughout the programme, each group also worked on a collective project around the global challenges they had agreed to explore. This was done by interviewing people. Each group selected specific interview questions, then students conducted the interviews with two members of their communities. The interviews were shared, then students were paired up. Paired students shared the interviews of the other with their own community members and asked for a response to those responses. The aim of this activity was to engage with different perspectives in participants' local communities and connect members of their own community to others around the world.

4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

4.1. Language course

Participation in the Connect Express counted for 15% of the final grade. Full participation in this VE required students to spend approximately ten hours on programme-related activities (including two hours for preparation) during the four-week period, and to submit a reflective final paper (1,500 words) to Soliya and myself. In the table below you can see my grading sheet, based on the student performance report provided by Soliya.

Table 1. Grading sheet for participation to the VE programme – beginner Italian course

Student	Level of participation in the dialogue	Student's engagement with their peers & in the group sessions.	Student's ability to practice constructive cross-cultural communication.	Student's positive contributions to the discussions & the group dynamics.	Student's language ability.	Attendance	Paper	Final course grade
1	Active	Good	Excellent	Good	Good	2	Very good	B+
2	Very Active	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	4	Good	A-
3	Very Active	Good	Excellent	Good	Excellent	3	Excellent	A
4	Active	Good	Good	Good	Excellent	4	Very good	A-
5	Very Active	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	4 (missed more than 10 minutes of 1)	Excellent	A
6	Very Active	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	4 (missed more than 10 minutes of 1)	Excellent	A
7	Very Active	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	3	Excellent	A
8	Very Active	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	4 (missed more than 10 minutes of 1)	Excellent	A
9	Active	Good	Good	Average	Excellent	3	Very good	B+

Initially, students in this course found it difficult to connect with strangers, sometimes unexpectedly older than them (in their late 20's or early 30's), in an environment that forced them to have conversations because participants were monitored. One student wrote in her paper the following comment: “all the conversations have to be ‘meaningful’ and I kind of had the feeling that everything I had to say had to come across as interesting or intelligent”. Because the interactions are not anonymous, participants felt more accountable for their words. Moreover, all students reflected on their own communicative strategies on different social media and learnt to adapt those to the new environment. They praised the platform feature that allows only one person to speak at once: other participants must ask and be granted speaking time. This enhanced deep and attentive listening, and self-reflection before speaking, something which most students admitted finding difficult. One student expressed it very effectively in his paper:

“this ... allowed for a nice opportunity to (perhaps mandatorily so) try a new way of listening to and interpreting what someone is saying and give me time to reflect on what I thought about it before responding. This also allowed me to look at my own preconceptions about what someone is saying and think about my process of interpreting other people”.

After a hesitant start however, most groups developed a safe environment and felt sufficiently connected to be able to talk intimately about topics that were at times controversial. Students commented that it was a pity that the programme was so short, because those fruitful conversations started happening in Week 3 or 4. They would have preferred shorter sessions for a longer period, so as to get to know each other better.

4.2. IC course

The VE Connect Global accounted for 25% of the final grade. The workload was approximately 25 hours, and included the following elements:

- attending all eight online two-hour dialogue sessions during the programme;
- preparing two sets of required readings;
- working collaboratively with the group peers on a project; and
- submitting a reflective paper with a summary of the interviews they conducted, reflecting on the process of engaging with the different perspectives during the project work and on the VE experience in general (1,300-1,500 words).

Students could obtain the Erasmus+ VE exchange badge if they attended 75% or more of the online sessions, submitted the paper, and wrote a VE programme evaluation. For my students, the VE was a graded element of the course, so the incentive to participate was provided by the grade rather than the badge.

However, to engage them actively with the VE, besides discussing the readings in class, I made the suggested weekly journaling mandatory. Students found it challenging to write one journal entry per week, together with doing the other assignments for the course. It was also hard for me to keep up, but it was vital: I was able to see patterns across the groups in topics discussed, but even more in the development of awareness and skills of students. Moreover, I could detect positive and negative experiences and feelings and bring them up in class, as well as give individual feedback and support where needed.

The paper for Soliya (1,500 words) was later on integrated in the course term paper (3,500 words, worth 40% of the final grade): students had to reflect on three learning experiences they had during the semester: one related to the VE, one related to an intercultural encounter in their own life, and one related to the case studies we examined. Some students experienced the VE as very enriching and eye-opening: they reported having developed critical self-reflection on their bias and on their communicative strategies. Because of that,

they were able to adapt those strategies and make a more valuable contribution to the group. The facilitators played a key role, and in most papers, students expressed appreciation for how facilitators managed the sessions without taking the lead.

Nevertheless, there were also students who felt that they did not get as much out of the programme as they had expected. This was the consequence of the group composition: nine out of 16 ended up being in a group with two other class peers. In their experience, the three UCU students in each group were always present and very active, while the other group peers missed sessions or did not participate actively enough. As a consequence, my students felt that they were just going over the same conversations we were already having in class about identity, stereotyping, difference, and more.

Furthermore, some students reported that other participants were difficult to understand or lacked the confidence to speak up, due to their proficiency level of English. UCU students have an oral proficiency level of C1 or higher on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), while in several groups the level of other participants was considerably lower. In my students' perceptions, many group peers participated in the VE primarily to practise their English and seemed thus to withdraw from actively contributing to the dialogues on sensitive topics. Alternatively, they used the written chat function to ask clarification questions or get help with formulating their responses, so my students felt as if most of the time they were helping others with the language. On the one hand I think that there might be situations where participating in a VE is one of very few options for students to practise with their English, so VE programmes might be promoted more as an opportunity to practise the language. This could create a difference in expectations among participants. On the other hand, though, we discussed in class that language barriers occur all the time, and that students should develop strategies for adapting to the proficiency level of their interlocutors. Also, being able to help others in overcoming those barriers and expressing themselves, thus being an intercultural mediator, is one of the intercultural communicative competences which students hope to develop in my courses.

Finally, students of the IC course experienced the VE as burdensome because the weekly journaling, the interviews, and the final VE paper were all due within eight weeks, while they also had other homework to do as well. Moreover, they had expected to engage in more controversial dialogues. Nonetheless, most students realised how easily they were able to empathise and bond with other humans, connecting across (virtual) borders through shared interests and visions for a better future.

Throughout both programmes, technical issues impacted the group dynamics very much. Oftentimes not only participants but also the facilitators would have to reboot and reconnect. One of my students commented that: “although the Soliya team was very efficient and helped almost everyone in a matter of seconds, the constant interruptions impeded the members from truly becoming comfortable with each other as they stopped us from concentrating solely on the conversation and constantly reminded everyone the online nature of the meetings”. Usually Soliya provides a reliable custom bandwidth optimisation to facilitate access to remote places and poor connections. The technical issues experienced during this semester were mainly due to the implementation of a new platform in the autumn of 2019.

5. Lessons learnt and conclusion

Integrating Connect Express in the language course proved valuable at an individual level, but too disconnected from the course aims and class practices. This was because it was an English-medium programme and so was not focused on practising the target language, Italian. On the other hand, the aims of Global Connect and its focus on constructive dialogue and finding paths for becoming change-makers resonate with the college’s educational vision and made it very relevant for the IC course. If teachers intend to fully integrate Soliya’s VE programmes in a course, the workload should not be underestimated. In the future I would consider planning fewer face-to-face classes during the period of the programme and making the journaling less frequent. I would also adapt my syllabus to avoid too many content overlaps.

Finally, I would create recurring moments for reflection about the online sessions during class time.

Reference

UCU. (n.d.). *University College Utrecht liberal arts vision statement. a holistic approach to undergraduate education*. https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/ucu_vision_mission_statement_april_2017.pdf



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