

# 10 Developing global citizenship through real-world tasks – a virtual exchange between North American university students and Italian upper-secondary school students

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## Abstract

This paper concerns a virtual exchange project between the University of Virginia (UVa), United States, and an upper-secondary school in Pavia, Italy. Centred on the question of gender equality, the project has been designed to take place over three years (2018–2021) with a direct reference to Robert O’Dowd’s transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education, proposed in 2018. As an integrated part of the language learning curriculum, the project creates a virtual space which parallels the space-time of traditional class tuition, and which students can inhabit with a significant degree of autonomy. More specifically, this paper gives an account of how students, through real-world tasks, could develop global citizenship.

**Keywords:** virtual exchange, intercultural competence, intercultural/global citizenship, active citizenship, gender equality.

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## 1. Introduction

We designed a foreign language acquisition project focused on cultural learning, namely ‘Language Forward Initiative’, based on virtual exchanges between students studying Italian at UVa, and students studying English at Liceo Adelaide Cairoli, an Italian upper-secondary school in Pavia. The project was co-designed by this researcher and Francesca Calamita (Italian studies, UVa, the coordinator of the research group on the ‘Language Forward Initiative’, Institute of World Languages). Eleven language programmes, including Italian, are involved, and each programme has designed a unique virtual space in which to develop students’ cultural and linguistic fluency. Our course design is based on the recommendations made by [O’Dowd and Ware \(2009\)](#), [O’Dowd \(2017, 2019\)](#), and [Byram, Golubeva, Hui, and Wagner \(2017\)](#) about factors that educators should consider when designing and implementing tasks for virtual exchange.

The structure and scope of the course aim to not only foster the development of foreign language skills, but also intercultural competence and global citizenship through the intercultural analysis of the cultural practices and values of the groups involved in the virtual exchanges.

Being realised over three years (autumn 2018/spring 2021), this project consistently blends face-to-face foreign language lessons with Skype-mediated digital learning. As an integrated part of the language learning curriculum, we have created a virtual space which parallels the space-time of traditional class tuition, and which students can inhabit with a significant degree of autonomy.

In the project’s second academic year (autumn 2019 and spring 2020) a challenging objective has been the development of virtual exchange focused on intercultural citizenship. For this, both groups of students are required to plan and carry out a civic action in their local communities; they are encouraged to become global citizens ready to interact effectively in multilingual and international contexts through active citizenship ([Wagner & Byram, 2017](#), p. 3). “[Intercultural citizenship] integrates the pillar of intercultural communicative

competence from foreign language education with the emphasis on civic action in the community from citizenship education” (Porto, 2014, p. 5).

This is done by taking students past their comfort zone and engaging them in real-world tasks through a project that has direct relevance to their own communities.

“The essential difference between global competence and global citizenship or intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship lies in the importance attributed to active engagement in society. [...] So, while intercultural or global competence refer to the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to communicate and act effectively and appropriately in different cultural contexts, global or intercultural citizenship borrow from models of citizenship education to refer to the application of these competences to actively participating in, changing and improving society” (O’Dowd, 2019, p. 17).

As such, the objectives of our virtual space are learning beyond the classroom walls through virtual exchange, intercultural communicative competence, working in a transnational team, motivation and engagement (meaningful learning), community engagement, and active citizenship. In our project, we have chosen to address a civic action centred on the question of gender equality.

## **2. Project rationale and outline**

Intercultural or global citizenship approaches “involve learners [...] actually working with members of other cultures as a transnational group in order to take action about an issue or problem which is common to both societies” (O’Dowd, 2019, p. 22). In designing the virtual exchange project, we referred to the transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education proposed by O’Dowd (2019), which “engages students with difference and alternative worldviews within a pedagogical structure of online collaboration, critical reflection, and active contribution to global society” (Leask, 2015, cited

in O’Dowd, 2019, p. 4). To lay the foundations for his transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education, O’Dowd (2019) used the two main models of interpretations of intercultural or global citizenship education: the Council of Europe’s (2016) framework of competences for democratic cultures and Byram’s (2008, 2011) framework for intercultural citizenship.

Specific attention will be drawn to the project’s second academic year, during which a virtual exchange focused on intercultural citizenship was organised. The project was developed in 12 weeks from October 2019 to February 2020, and each semester included six Skype meetings. The main aim of the project was to plan a civic action to foster gender equality in the students’ respective communities. The action in the community involved research, reflection, and co-creating a formal proposal.

Thirty North American students were partnered with 20 Italian upper-secondary school students to discuss (in dyads or triads) via desktop videoconferencing the theme of gender equality. Using the synchronous video communication tool Skype, students met weekly to speak for 20 to 30 minutes in Italian and 20 to 30 minutes in English. The students did the Skype component privately (tandem learning set up) using both languages, and chose their favourite day/time within the week.

To begin, before students introduced themselves to their partners, they engaged in pre-virtual exchange activities which guided them in the discussions that could then commence. For example, to activate students’ prior knowledge of the theme, ‘ice-breaker’ and brainstorming activities centred on gender equality took place in face-to-face lessons and on the university/school platforms. They were targeted to introduce key vocabulary items and/or concepts necessary for students to discuss the theme in Skype meetings, which were introduced by means of matching activities implemented through digital noticeboards (Padlet). Students were required to match vocabulary with definitions and images presented in sticky notes on a wall-like space. Secondly, articles and short authentic videos between five and ten minutes long on the question of

gender equality were made available on the university and school platforms, for instance articles about the imbalance in main European cities between numbers of streets named after men, and those named after women.

In their first Skype meeting, students introduced themselves and their school/university to their international partners in North America or Italy in the target language. As [Carloni and Zuccala \(2018\)](#) point out:

“task-based learning seems especially suitable to online intercultural exchanges ([Hampel, 2010](#); [Hauck, 2010](#); [Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2017](#)). [...] In screen-based learning environments, tasks (such as problem solving, decision making, opinion-exchange, and jigsaws) can thus promote dialogical interaction focusing on real-world issues effectively” (pp. 419-420).

Consequently, three main types of tasks were used in the virtual exchange:

“information exchange, which ‘involves learners providing their telecollaborative partners with information about their personal biographies, local schools or towns or aspects of their home cultures’ ([O’Dowd & Ware, 2009](#), p.175); comparison and analysis, which ‘requires learners not only to exchange information, but also to go a step further and carry out comparisons or critical analyses of cultural products from both cultures (e.g. books, surveys, films, newspaper articles)’ (p. 175); and collaboration and product creation, which ‘require [...] learners not only to exchange and compare information but also to work together to produce a joint product or conclusion (p.178)’” ([Carloni & Zuccala, 2018](#), p. 424).

In their second online meeting, students discussed articles and videos uploaded to the university/school platforms. The task was to read and watch the materials individually, and to discuss them within the class face-to-face and with the students’ respective international, online partners.

In the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth Skype meeting with their international partners, students reflected on the creation of a transnational group, whose aim was to consider the issue of gender equality and plan civic action. To begin this phase of the project, the student dyads/triads planned to seek information about a woman who is not well known, but relevant for the history/life of their town and its community. Each dyad/triad chose a woman in Pavia and one in Charlottesville. The students then planned to organise a written proposal to name after these women new or unnamed streets/places in their respective towns. The last phase of the project consisted of writing down proposals in English and Italian (in dyads/triads) to be presented to the mayors of Pavia and Charlottesville.

During the Skype meetings, the students, in dyads, discussed and made plans to collaboratively create a multimodal presentation on how they were developing their civic action. Communication and collaboration among the students led to the creation of a product planned and realised by each dyad of students. Students selected the digital technologies they wanted to use to create their multimodal presentations, and once they were finished, they uploaded them onto the university/school platforms. All the learners involved in the online intercultural exchanges watched the presentations created by the other students which had been made available on the project website. The presentations were also discussed in face-to-face lessons. The students' final presentations and the discussion were assessed.

The final discussion of the content of the students' presentations uploaded to the platforms and of the civic action was organised in the form of a group-to-group video conferencing session (the whole group of students respectively in Italy and in the USA were involved). Learners asked questions on the other teams' presentations, answered questions about their own presentations, and managed turn taking. Through this group-to-group discussion, the Italian and North American students narrowed the final selection to six women, three for Charlottesville and three for Pavia, and to a final version of the written proposal (in English and Italian) to be presented to the respective city mayor. The development of this intercultural citizenship-focused exchange in the final

phase of the project took students out of their comfort zones and engaged them in real-world tasks.

Seeking others' perspectives and advice, the students proposed change, and finally acted together to instigate change in their local communities (Byram, 2008; O'Dowd, 2019). The objectives were to promote the analysis of the chosen issue, in this case gender equality, but also to enhance dialogical interaction in the target language and foster intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship. We assisted students during in-class face-to-face activities in considering the value systems underlying the Italian and North American cultural practices in relation to gender equality. To foster intercultural competence in the digital learning environments, we worked in class to "involve [...] learners in moving between cultures and reflecting on their own cultural positioning and the role of language and culture within it" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 117). Students' voices, experiences, and background knowledge are central to discussing topics within an intercultural framework. As mentioned by Carloni and Zuccala (2018), students are encouraged to "examine phenomena and experience their own cultural situatedness while seeking to enter into the cultural worlds of others" (p. 436). It requires an act of engagement in which learners compare their own cultural assumptions, expectations, practices, and meanings with those of others, recognising that these are formed within a cultural context that is different from their own (Scarino, 2014, p. 391). "Video conferencing [was] seen as developing students' abilities to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and also elicit, through a face-to-face dialogue, the concepts and values which underlie their partners' behaviour and their opinions" (O'Dowd, 2018, p. 11). However, emails and WhatsApp were employed to both send and receive much more detailed information on the two cultures' products and practices as seen from the partners' perspectives. In the classroom, the students' learning was continuously supported by guided reflections concerning the intercultural encounters and questions made possible by the virtual exchange. The Skype meetings and other means of exchange and collaboration increased the students' exposure to spoken Italian/English, which fostered the development of their speaking, interactional, and fluency skills in the target language, allowing them to experience authentic language use, enabling

access to meaningful interactions, fostering their active learning, increasing their motivation, agency, autonomy, and cultivating active citizenship.

### 3. Conclusion

Our project aims to create a virtual space where students' global social participation and engagement is stimulated, facilitated, and formally valued. Facilitated by Skype, regular virtual exchange between transnational teams allows the students to address a socio-political issue that has urgency in today's world, and that can be brought to the fore in their foreign language learning. Thus, in the context of their language studies, the young people are empowered to actively reflect on their role in a democratic society as active contributors: that is, as intercultural and global citizens.

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