

Project

Exploring the Impact of Telecollaboration in Initial Teacher Education: The EVALUATE project

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Approaches to Initial Teacher Education in Europe are putting an increasing emphasis on developing the ability of student-teachers to use online technologies and virtual networks to create online collaborative learning environments which go beyond the classroom and which engage both students and teachers in intercultural collaboration and learning.

The Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) Working Group on Schools Policy, for example, has highlighted the need to promote innovative approaches to education in ITE and, in particular, for educational systems to “shift away from isolated classrooms towards new methods based on broad collaboration” (2015, p.2). The Working Group proposes that teachers should be encouraged to incorporate both collaborative practices and a collaborative culture into their work and that training institutions should take steps to engage teachers in “networks, professional learning communities and other partnerships” (2015, p. 36). Similarly, the European Commission’s Communication *New Priorities for European Cooperation in Education and Training* highlights the need to train educators to use ICT tools in combination with innovative pedagogies (2015, p. 5).

However, research would suggest that there remains a large gap between aspirations for innovative approaches to online collaborative learning and the reality of what actually occurs in schools. The *European Education Monitor* laments that “ICT is mostly used as a remedial tool” (2015, p. 59) and that innovative approaches to using online technologies is often “confined to the pedagogical activities of a minority of particularly devoted teachers” (2015, p. 57). Similarly, the 2015 Report of the European Council & Commission on the implementation of ET2020 states that high-quality learning requires “a more active use of innovative pedagogies and digital skills and tools” (2015, p. 5) and calls for teacher training programmes to “reap the benefits of new ICT developments and adopt innovative and active pedagogies, based on participatory and project-based methods”.

Obviously, if student-teachers are to engage their students in innovative and collaborative approaches to online learning when they become teachers, they first of all need to experience this type of learning during their study programmes. One potentially effective way of helping student-teachers to have first-hand experience of online collaborative approaches to learning and teaching is telecollaboration. Telecollaboration, also referred to as Virtual Exchange or Online Intercultural Exchange, involves engaging students in task-based interaction and collaborative exchange projects with partner-classes in other locations through online communication technologies under the guidance of their teachers (O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016). In contrast to many forms of online learning which are based on the transfer of information through video lectures etc., telecollaboration is based on student-centred, intercultural and collaborative approaches to learning where knowledge and understanding are constructed through learner interaction and negotiation.

In European school education, telecollaboration has already been recognised as a powerful tool for the development of students’ competences in the form of eTwinning (Education for Change, 2013). However, it has been shown that one of the barriers to

the success of eTwinning is that it is not included in pre-service teacher education. Whilst eTwinning offers continuous professional development for in-service teachers, the take-up of such telecollaborative online collaboration initiatives will remain limited until trainee-teachers are given the opportunity to experience these online learning experiences during their own training.

Various studies have reported how telecollaboration has been used as a tool in teacher-education contexts to date. Much of this research has highlighted the value of an 'experiential modelling approach' (Guichon & Hauck 2011: 188) which involves offering trainee teachers the opportunity to take part in telecollaborative exchanges themselves in order to experience the tools and processes which they will be expected to use in their own classrooms in the future. Researchers who have followed this approach include Antoniadou (2011), who engaged Spanish student-teachers in telecollaborative exchange with American peers using the 'Second Life' virtual world. Similarly, Müller-Hartmann (2012) describes how student-teachers in Heidelberg, Germany and at Columbia University, New York collaborated together online in the analysis and re-design of textbook tasks.

However, while there are various studies which report on the impact of one particular exchange, there have not been to date any large scale studies which have demonstrated the learning outcomes of telecollaborative exchange on student-teachers. With this in mind, the EVALUATE project (*Evaluating and Upscaling Telecollaborative Teacher Education*) aims to gauge the impact of telecollaborative learning on student-teachers involved in Initial Teacher Education in various European countries and regions.

EVALUATE: Researching and Upscaling Telecollaboration in Initial Teacher Education

The guiding research question for the EVALUATE study is:

Will participation in telecollaborative exchange contribute to the development of competences which future teachers need to teach, collaborate and innovate effectively in a digitalised and networked world?

The specific research questions are:

- Will telecollaboration have a positive impact on future teachers' digital-pedagogical competence?
- Will telecollaboration have a positive impact on future teachers' intercultural competence?
- Will telecollaboration have a positive impact on future teachers' foreign language competence?
- How do socio-institutional factors in each of the participating countries shape and affect the impact of telecollaboration in ITE?

The project is funded by the Erasmus+ KA3 programme (EACEA/34/2015) and is a European Policy Experiment (EPE). Policy experimentations help to assess the relevance, effectiveness and potential scalability of innovative policy measures through experimental or semi-experimental approaches. Three key actors in European policy experimentations are: the responsible public authorities, the researchers and the target groups.

Our study is a randomized field trial involving student-teachers studying at Initial Teacher Education (ITE) institutions in the participating regions of the EU - i.e. Castilla y León; Spain and Baden Wurttemberg, Germany, and in the participating countries - Hungary, Spain and Portugal as well as other countries of the European Union. All the students involved in the EPE will be taking courses in teaching methodology at their respective institutions.

Approximately 600 student-teachers across Europe have already taken part in the EPE study in the Winter semester 2017 (September-December 2017) and a further 300 will take part in the Spring semester 2018 (February-July 2018). This means we expect approximately 800 student-teachers from across Europe to have taken part in the

telecollaborative treatment and to have participated in the EPE data collection process by July 2018.

The treatment involves engaging classes of ITE students in a period of intensive telecollaborative exchange with partner classes in ITE institutions in other countries based on specifically-designed tasks and content related to pedagogical-digital competences as well as intercultural competence, foreign language competence and other transversal competences. Pedagogical digital competence refers to the teacher's ability to make pedagogically informed choices in terms of selection, integration and evaluation of ICT tools and applications in their teaching. Intercultural competence refers to the students' ability to work and collaborate effectively with members of other cultures.

The pedagogical model of telecollaborative exchange which will be used in the exchanges is based on the Progressive Exchange Model which has been widely used in telecollaborative research and practice to date (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009, O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). The model involves three interrelated tasks which move from *Information Exchange* to *Comparing and analyzing cultural practices* and finally to *Working on a collaborative product* (see figure 1 below). Within this structure, teacher-trainers carrying out the treatment will be able to choose from various tasks at each stage of the telecollaborative task sequence in order to cater for different educational contexts and learning aims. However, all the tasks available to the teacher-trainers will focus on the development of the key competences and themes which have been identified by the public authorities as key for teacher education in their countries / regions.

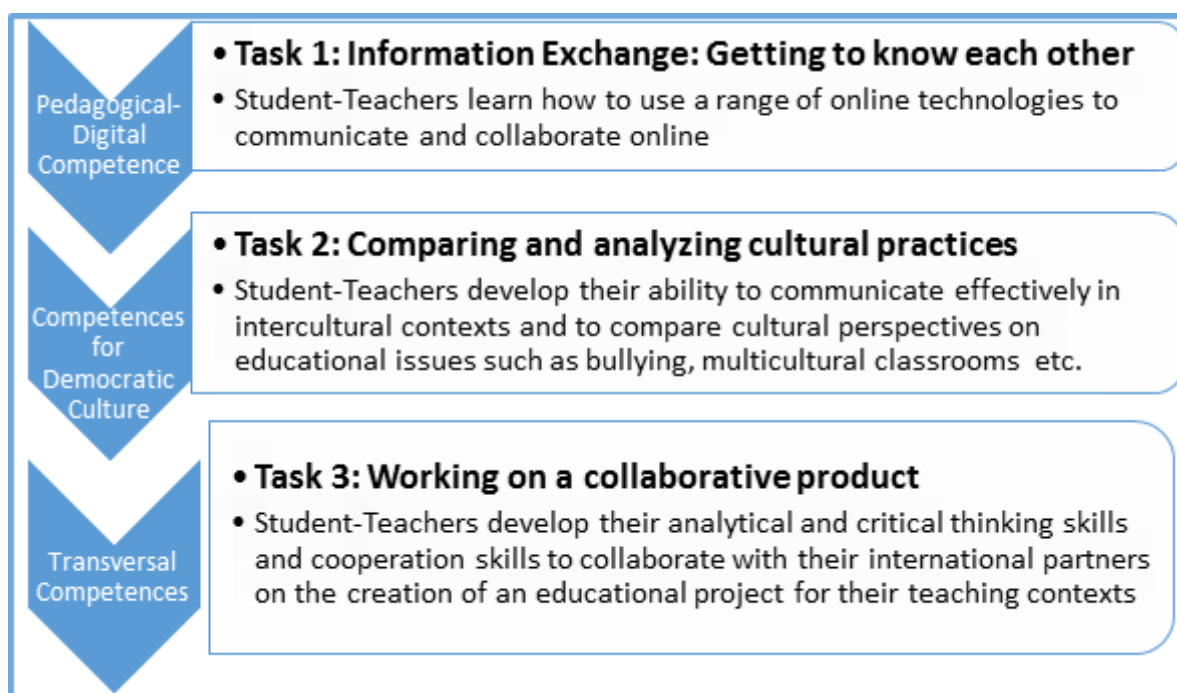


Figure 1. A Progressive Exchange Model of Telecollaboration.

The process of evaluating telecollaborative exchange in ITE is complex and various issues need to be addressed when choosing a research methodology. For this reason, the research team will follow a mixed methods approach (Nunan & Bailey, 2009) using quantitative data collection to measure the development of students' intercultural and digital-pedagogical competences and corpus analysis to measure gains in language competence. This data will be triangulated with qualitative data in order to answer questions related to why telecollaboration had the impact it did, how it was integrated in the participating institutions and how the telecollaborative model impacted differently across various socio-institutional contexts.

Upscaling Telecollaboration in Initial Teacher Education – The role of the Public Authorities

What makes this project different from many other research initiatives is that five ministries of Education form part of the consortium. This means that steps for upscaling telecollaboration in the various regions and countries has already been built into the project objectives. If our European Policy Experiment can demonstrate the positive impact of telecollaborative learning on student-teachers' digital, intercultural and linguistic competences, then the public authorities will take steps to facilitate the transferability and scalability of telecollaborative exchange in teacher education by, for example, providing the necessary training and resources for teacher training in this approach; ensuring greater awareness among decision makers of the approach through advocacy, events, profile raising, and coalition building across national boundaries; and, finally, providing qualifications and academic recognition for teacher-trainers who develop their telecollaborative skills and engage their learners successfully in such practices.

For more information about the EVALUATE study and to learn more about how you can involve your students of Initial Teacher Education in telecollaborative exchange projects, please contact evaluateprojecteu@gmail.com

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