

Please note! This is a self-archived version of the original article.

Huom! Tämä on rinnakkaistallenne.

To cite this Article / Käytä viittauksessa alkuperäistä lähdettä:

Abruquah, E. 2017. Effective Telecollaboration in the Digital Age. Teoksessa TAMK-konferenssi - TAMK Conference 2017. Learning and working together. Tampere: Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu, Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulun julkaisuja, 93-102.

DOI / [URL:http://julkaisut.tamk.fi/PDF-tiedostot-web/Muut/TAMK-Conference2017.pdf](http://julkaisut.tamk.fi/PDF-tiedostot-web/Muut/TAMK-Conference2017.pdf)

Emmanuel Abruquah

12. EFFECTIVE TELECOLLABORATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

THE PURPOSE of this article is to present good practices of telecollaboration in the digital age. This paper is based on a series of linked telecollaborative projects conducted over the past few years. The first part of the article deals with understanding telecollaboration as an alternative way of teaching and explains its importance in the digital age. The second part deals with how telecollaboration enhances learners' language skills and improves intercultural competence. The final part shares some ideas on how to get connected to the global telecollaboration community.

Keywords: Telecollaboration, language teaching, intercultural competence.

Background

The series of projects discussed in this article was initiated after the 2nd Erasmus International Week for Language Teachers held in May 2015; this conference was jointly arranged by the Language Centres of Jyväskylä UAS and Tampere UAS (TAMK). The idea for the projects arose during a brainstorming session on the final day of the conference, when teachers from various countries found a common area of interest to explore. The purpose of the projects was to engage students in cultural exchange using Internet technologies. An important target group was deemed to be students who were less likely to gain first-hand experience of other cultures by travelling abroad. The basic idea was to get students to share information about their different cultures, interacting via social media tools, using English as the lingua franca. Since autumn

2015, four major telecollaboration projects have taken place between TAMK and partner institutions. In autumn 2015, a telecollaboration course was created and piloted. On the bases of the experience gained from the pilot course, further development took place, and three more implementations of the course were run in the autumn semester 2016.

Objectives

The main purpose of these projects was to equip students with 21st century skills for global employability, which include language skills, intercultural communicative competence, and collaborative skills. Participating students also gained experience of working in global virtual teams in a digitalised working environment.

Telecollaboration and the Digital Age

During the 21st century, the use of computers and telecommunication in learning has become increasingly widespread. Emerging trends in education have created awareness of the need to adapt to new ways of learning, information sharing and knowledge-creation. Telecollaboration is part of this trend. It has been in existence in the education sector in different forms for a long time. O'Dowd (2014). Lewis (2011) and O'Dowd (2014) use the term Online Intercultural

Exchange (OIE) to refer to the use of modern computers, telecommunication tools, social media etc. in facilitating language and intercultural communication competence among learners that are in different geographical areas, under the guidance of educators and or expert facilitators. (2015) This definition matches our project activities very closely.

The digital age can be described as the time where the internet and cloud-computing have come to dominate information sharing and knowledge-creation. Ferrari (2013) affirms that competence in the digital age means the confident, critical and creative use of ICT to achieve goals related to work, employability, learning, leisure, inclusion and/or participation in society. To be competent in the digital age, one must possess skills in collaboration, information sharing, communication across social media platforms, content-creation, information security and safety, and problem-solving.

Importance of Telecollaboration in Language learning

The European Union emphasizes the importance of mobility for both teachers and students to strengthen their personal development and employability. The EU ministers in charge of Higher education estimate that in 2020 about 20 percent of Higher education graduate should have had a period of practical training or study abroad. (Brussels, 2009) In other words, 80 per cent of students will still have had no international exchange. Telecollaboration can help such stay-at-home students to develop their digital competence and skills needed for current and future work environments by providing them with international experience virtually.

Telecollaboration promotes internationalisation of education institutions, increases visibility, creates awareness, and develops and strengthens partner relationships. It also intensifies competition and collaboration, and promotes intercultural competence among students and teachers. Finally, it encourages autonomy in learning. For telecollaboration to be effective, a common language, lingua franca, is needed for the multi-directional communications. The participating students initiate contacts and conduct subsequent online meetings using English as the lingua franca. The

processes and the tasks are designed to help students (language learners) to take responsibility for improving their language and communication skills independently.

Effective Telecollaboration

Running an effective telecollaboration course requires more from a teacher than an online course or traditional classroom teaching. Puentedura (2008) suggests ways of enhancing technology-integration in education by proposing a TPACK model, which stands for Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge. This is a good starting point for an effective telecollaboration. However, the good practices accumulated throughout the series of projects under discussion stem from continuous development of the whole process using comments and feedback collected after each project implementation.

◁ All the project implementations were designed following simple pedagogical principles. Designing excellent online courses and activities requires that every component of best online pedagogical practice be factored into the process. If the students are to achieve the aims set for the course, the educational activities must be easy to understand, but challenging to perform. They should also be fun; gamification is one of the areas to be considered when designing online courses. Mechanisms for rewarding students should be built into every activity, to motivate them to participate actively in online collaborative activities and tasks. ▷

Research design

This paper discusses four successive telecollaborative learning projects in which TAMK participated with partner institutions in Hungary, Germany and the Czech Republic. Each project imple-

mentation was given a unique name to reflect the objectives of each one. The last three projects, which took place during autumn 2016 semester, were themed as follows: 1. Developing Collaborative Competence in the 21st century (TAMK's media students and Budapest School of Business students); 2. Intercultural Communicative Competence for Global Employability (ICCAGE), (TAMK's Environmental Engineering students and Budapest School of Business students); 3. Global Virtual Teams (GVT) (Business students from TAMK, Brno University of Applied Sciences and Paderborn University of Applied Sciences). About 88 business students took part in this final implementation: 26 students from Paderborn, 50 students from TAMK and 12 students from Brno.

First, a good theme for team project work is needed for the common task, which is the main output of the teamwork. Also, during the preparatory stage, a common online platform is needed for communicating with all the students in the distant geographical areas; course information, clear basic instructions and all the submissions can be found there. Then grouping students into their international working teams/groups must be done carefully, taking into consideration how many partner institutions and how many students from each institution are involved in the project. Thus, depending on the implementation, two or three students from each institution made up a 6-member team.

Each implementation of the telecollaboration course started with a "getting to know each other" phase, also called the ice-breaking phase. Here, a series of guided activities are needed to help the students with their team-building process via the online platform. Such activities include introducing themselves to their team/group members, and deciding on which communication channel would be convenient for their team: Skype, Google hangouts, Whatsapp or some other option. These and other team-

building exercises help the students to bond well for the task ahead. During the second phase, the teams work on their selected topics, which will be presented in the third phase of the course. The final output of the course is either a presentation, a group essay, personal reflection on the collaboration or a media board.

Student feedback on the first implementation (autumn 2015) showed that the work set for the students was more challenging than we teacher-designers had assumed; this had an adverse effect on student motivation. This pedagogical challenge was addressed in the second implementation, Spring 2016. The project planning continued with the creation of a common Google Drive account for sharing materials and collaborating on developing the project plan. Online planning meetings were also organized via Google Hangout, which we found to be more user-friendly than other available channels.

Subsequent collaboration amongst us teachers enabled many improvements to be incorporated into the second and third implementations of the Telecollaboration course. Students' feedback was taken into consideration, so both materials and processes were redesigned to take account of all the problems, which were encountered in the pilot implementation.

The project also faced challenges at an institutional level, which were beyond the control of the participating teachers. Firstly, at the beginning of the project, scheduling problems arose, which led to partners from Spain and Estonia dropping out at an early stage. Specifically, the starting date of the academic year varied from one institution to another, making it impossible to schedule the learning activities conveniently for all participants. It is also worth considering how successful the project has been in reach-

ing one of its important target groups, namely students who were less likely to have the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of other cultures by travelling abroad. It became evident that the group of students who took part in the project already had a great deal of international experience. In future, this issue should be addressed at the student-recruitment stage.

An additional concern was about the weight (number of credits) given to intercultural competence courses in the various partner universities. At the partner institution in Hungary, for example, Intercultural Communication is a complete course worth 2 ECTS. At TAMK, by contrast, intercultural communication is only one topic in a 3 ECTS language course; it is covered in a two-hour lecture, followed by an assignment where students gather information about Finnish trade partners to determine how doing business in the countries concerned could be influenced by cultural differences. Their findings are then presented in class. Another example could be seen in the latest implementation – the Global Virtual Teams (GVT) course – with Paderborn University of Applied Sciences and TAMK. While students in Paderborn earned 5 full credits for participating in the GVT course, TAMK students completed the same work in partial fulfilment of a 3-credit course.

Apart from the general preparations and guidelines discussed earlier in this paper, telecollaboration goes beyond just running an online course. The cultural aspect of it requires discussions on major topics and searches for theoretical explanations for some of the cultural behaviours observed. To achieve this, some of the theories of well-known experts on intercultural communication in the academic field, like Hofstede and Trompenaars, are discussed to some extent to enable interpretation of otherwise puzzling behaviours.

Finally, telecollaboration necessitates enthusiastic partners. Engaging in such a demanding activity requires committed partners who are ready to integrate the work flexibly into their schedules and curricula to make it happen. When looking for willing collaborators to start such intercultural cooperation, existing partner institutions could be the first places to consider. However, a telecollaboration association, Unicollaboration, has been established to facilitate development and research in this area. The two main objectives of this association are:

- to promote the development and integration of telecollaborative research and practice across all disciplines and subject areas in higher education
- to actively engage in awareness raising of telecollaboration and virtual exchange at institutional and policy-making level (Unicollaboration 2016).

It holds a biennial conference on telecollaboration research and practices. The first was held in Leon, Spain in 2014; the second conference was held in Dublin in April 2016, where our first pilot project on Telecollaboration was presented. The third conference will be held in Krakow, Poland in 2018. At these conferences, new contacts and partners can be established for telecollaboration. What is more, the website <http://www.unicollaboration.org> provides the possibility to find collaborators via a virtual exchange platform! (<http://uni-collaboration.eu/>). While this platform is likely to yield a positive result, taking part in the biennial conferences is still highly recommended to develop personal contacts face-to-face.

Conclusion

To run an effective telecollaboration certain principles need to be followed. While these principles are presented here in random order, every group of telecollaborators will need to prioritise them to suit their own circumstances. First, there is a need for committed partners, namely teachers / course developers who are willing to take on the challenge and extra load of work. The teachers in question should have online pedagogical knowledge as well as technological knowledge to get started. Next, a lingua franca should be chosen as the medium of instruction and communication. This is the common

language among the participating students from all the different geographical areas. Then, a common online platform, like Moodle, Wikispace, Eliademy etc is required for distributing general instructions and materials. The set of instructions should be easy to understand but the tasks should be challenging and interesting enough to motivate the students. A clear evaluation or reward system should be allocated to every task to increase the level of student motivation and participation. Finally, strict deadlines must be set to ensure smooth running of the course.

It became evident during the last implementation that incorporating video-conferencing into the process improves the quality of work and level of student motivation. While this is an important finding, it is also very difficult to arrange video conferences for about fifteen groups in three or four countries. The technology sets its own limitations as the number of participating institutions increases. However, there are many technologies to exploit in making video-conferencing a significant feature in future telecollaboration projects.

References:

BRUSSELS, 2009. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28–29 April 2009

FERRARI, 2013 – A Framework for Developing and Understanding Digital Competence in Europe

LEWIS, T., CHANIER, T. & YOUNGS, B. 2011. Special issue commentary multilateral online exchanges for language and cultural learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 15 (1), 3–9. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/issues/february2011/commentary.pdf>

O'DOWD, R. 2015. Supporting in-service language educators in learning to telecollaborate. *Language Learning & Technology*, 19 (1), 64–83. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/issues/february2015/odowd.pdf>

O'DOWD, R. (2014, Sep 19). What is Telecollaboration? Retrieved from SlideShare: <http://www.slideshare.net/dfmro/cgu-o-dowd>

PUENTEDURA, R. (2008, Dec 22). TPCK and SAMR: Models for Enhancing Technology Integration. *As We May Teach: Educational Technology, From Theory into Practice*. Maine, USA.

UNICOLLABORATION. 2016. Cross-Disciplinary Organisation for Telecollaboration and Virtual Exchange in Higher Education. Read 3.1.2017. <http://www.unicollaboration.org>