Frequently Asked Questions: The pedagogy of intercultural exchanges

1   What is a telecollaborative project?

A telecollaborative project is a learning environment in which
students from two or more educational institutions collaborate online on a task or a sequence of
tasks. In the process they communicate in real time, asynchronously or both using a variety of
online tools. It is important that students' work is monitored by their teachers and that it is
organised around a task or a sequence of tasks.

2.   How does a telecollaborative project change my teaching?

This is a question which can bring many different answers. One of the basic differences is a very
clear shift towards student autonomy. The teacher organizes the exchange, structures it
according to the academic calendar and chooses tasks that will help him/her achieve the desired
objectives. However, when it comes to actual task performance, the students are much more
independent since their performance is fuelled by the quality of interaction with their partners
rather than the interaction with the teacher.
It is also important to remember that in telecollaborative exchanges the teacher needs to be
much more flexible. S/he needs to step away from a rigid lesson plan and be able to view the
teaching situation from several perspectives (her/his own, her/his students', the partner
teacher's and the partnering students'). The need for flexibility also comes from the complexity
of such exchanges: a teacher should be ready to adopt plan B in case of technical problems or
lack of contact or support from the partnering teacher.

3.   What role does language play?

Language use and language learning play a crucial role in the telecollaborative project and are
closely linked to cultural learning. Language use might differ substantially from project to project
and learners' competences in the target language(s) have to be considered. We differentiate
between projects where one language is used as the lingua franca for all participants, projects
where foreign or second language learners work with partners who speak the foreign language
as their L1, or projects where partners learn each others' L1 as a foreign or second language.
There are also projects where we have a mix in the respective classrooms, for example a rather
homogenous group in one classroom of native speakers or foreign language learners and a

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heterogeneous group in the other partners' classroom of native speakers and speakers who use that language as a foreign or second language.

Depending on the objectives of the project, language can be used as a mere communicative tool or it can be at the center of some of the tasks, when for example French- and Spanish-speaking students who learn each others' L1 as a foreign language, correct each other's language in the project tasks. A language focus is also an option when foreign language teacher trainees work with partners who learn that specific language and they help them develop their language competence in the project by designing tasks that focus on language work.

4. How do I select tasks?

When selecting tasks, the first thing that all the teachers involved need to do is consider what they want to achieve through the exchange. For instance, it is crucial to decide whether the purpose is to make the students practice language skills, develop content knowledge or some kind of expertise or, perhaps, make them concentrate on the development of social skills.

A lot depends on what the priorities and local constraints are. Will it be possible to arrange it for the students to communicate in real time or will the asynchronous mode be preferable? Do I want to engage the students in collaborative production of a certain product (text, presentation, podcasts etc.), or is it my intention to make them analyse and compare certain aspects or products (films, fashion, attitudes etc.). This is well reflected in the types of tasks you can find in the databank, and which range from information exchange tasks through analysis and comparison to collaborative ones.

All the tasks need to be agreed upon by the participating teachers. It is possible, though, to adjust them to the local needs by adding supporting literature or additional tasks done locally.

Watch this video to watch interviews in which practitioners share their views on the choice of tasks.

5. How do I sequence tasks?

In general, in sequencing tasks for telecollaborative exchanges we follow the same rules as we do in a traditional classroom: we start with simpler activities, both in terms of language and cognitive load, and we progress to more complex and more independent ones. However, unlike in the classroom where students typically know one another, we also need to pay special attention to assisting the students in creating social bonds with their partners. This is done at the beginning of an exchange through ice-breaking tasks, in which the participants exchange information about their expectations, experiences or home cultures (information exchange tasks). You will find a selection of such ice-breakers in the INTENT databank.

Once the students get to know one another, they can start working on more complex tasks in which they compare and analyse certain issues or products (comparison and analysis tasks) and/or finally, create products of their own (collaborative tasks). No matter how long the

exchange takes, it should end in a wrap-up session during which the students reflect on what worked or did not work for them in the exchange and on what they have learnt in the process.

6. How do I use classroom time?

Most people think that telecollaboration is all about working online, but the value of classroom time should not be underestimated. In fact, it is in the classroom that the teacher can get a real insight into the quality of interaction between the students as well as the problems and cultural clashes they have to deal with. Classroom time is also invaluable for reflection which, again, can be prompted and shaped by the teacher. So, basically, the classroom is the place where students bring the observations and experiences they get while working online, share them and confront them with those of their classmates. In this way they expand and enrich their own thinking.

7. How do I organize collaborative work?

2) the students work in intercultural teams.Again, this is something you need to consult with the partner. A lot depends on the choice of tasks, the number of students in each of the groups etc. The two common patterns are
1) the students work in their local groups and share their work with a partnering group for feedback;
The former pattern may work well when content knowledge is in focus, whereas the latter one is conducive to increased language practice and the development of communicative and intercultural competence.

8. What makes a good collaborative activity?

There is no one recipe for a good activity. A lot depends on what the teachers want to achieve. In general, a telecollaborative task should make the students experience possibly many real-life contexts: e.g. authentic communication in which meaning is prioritized over form and needs to be negotiated with partners, a purposeful use of online tools which facilitate task completion and, last but not least, cognitively authentic problem-solving situations in which participants need to seek a solution. Paradoxically, good telecollaborative activities do not need to run smoothly. They might be fraught with culture clashes which, in fact, open the participants up to new perspectives and help them see their individual experience in a broader, intercultural context.

9. What do I do when intercultural misunderstandings arise?

Misunderstandings of this kind require even more collaboration between the partnering teachers. It is always a good solution to consult the partner and ask for help, mediation or explanation.Intercultural misunderstandings are very common in telecollaborative projects. In fact, it is through these misunderstandings that the participants learn to negotiate, compromise and solve problems. It is important for the teacher to spot such misunderstandings in time and show them to the participants in a positive light. One of the principles of telecollaboration is that none of the cultures involved in an exchange should be perceived as a dominant one. Therefore, whenever clashes are experienced, it is vital for the teacher to explain them with the characteristics of the other culture in mind. This usually happens during in-class time, when the participants reflect on the quality of their online work and online communication.

10. How do I evaluate the project?

Assessment is one of the most challenging issues in telecollaborative projects. First of all, students' performance is stretched over time and requires collaborative effort. Besides, during an exchange the students need to engage a lot of skills and competences, which requires instruments other than objective testing. In general, it is recommended that the teacher uses either evaluation grids, which rank different types of performance according to previously selected criteria, or the e-portfolio, which is a selection of evidence for learning and improvement that the students collect in the course of the project. In particular the latter form promotes students' self-reflection.
In fact, most tasks and task sequences that you can find in our databank include information on how to assess students' work.

More detailed information on assessment and the use of the e-portfolio can be found here.