

# Virtual Exchange and internationalising the classroom

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*Telecollaboration, or 'Virtual Exchange' refers to the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of learners in geographically distant locations with the aim of developing their foreign language skills, digital competence and intercultural competence through online collaborative tasks and project work. In recent years approaches to Virtual Exchange have evolved in different contexts and different areas of university education and these approaches have had, at times, very diverse organisational structures and pedagogical objectives. This article provides an overview of the different models and approaches to Virtual Exchange which are currently being used in higher education contexts and outlines how the activity has contributed to internationalising university education to date.*

**KEYWORDS:** telecollaboration, virtual exchange, online communication, digital competence, intercultural competence



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Universities are increasingly concerned with the task of preparing graduates to be active and responsible global citizens in a world which is intrinsically digitalised, globalised and multicultural in nature. For many years, international mobility programmes were considered the most effective way to prepare students to be 'global citizens' and develop their 'capacity to critique the world they live, see problems and issues from a range of perspectives, and take action to address them' (Leask, 2015, p. 17). However, the number of students who have engaged in study abroad programmes remains stubbornly low and research has demonstrated the limited impact of study abroad on students' intercultural attitudes and awareness (Kinginger, 2009; Papatsiba, 2006). This has led educational

institutions to look increasingly at 'internationalisation at home' (IaH), defined by Beelen and Jones (2015) as '*the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments*' (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 59).

As part of their IaH initiatives, a growing number of higher education institutions are engaging their students in Virtual Exchange or telecollaboration – a rich and multifaceted activity which refers to online intercultural interaction and collaboration projects with partner classes from other cultural contexts under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators (Dooly, 2017; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). Virtual Exchange has had

a long history in university language education (Warschauer, 1995) and, over the past two decades, approaches to Virtual Exchange have evolved in different contexts and different areas of university education and these approaches have had, at times, very diverse pedagogical objectives. For example, approaches in foreign language education have explored the development of autonomy in language learners, foreign language competence (O'Rourke, 2007) as well as aspects of intercultural competence (Belz, 2002). Virtual Exchange initiatives such as *Soliya* have focused on bringing students from the West into dialogue with students from the Muslim world with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others on important socio-political issues and also to develop critical thinking, intercultural communication and media literacy skills (Helm, 2016). Meanwhile, initiatives from the field of Business Studies such as *XCulture* have striven to develop in students the necessary competences to work in what are commonly described as *Global Virtual Teams* (GVTs) and to give them first-hand experience in online international collaboration in professional contexts (Taras et al., 2013). In this article, we will review the different approaches and highlight the different characteristics of each model of exchange.

## 2. THE ORIGINS OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

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*'The first examples of online collaborative projects between classrooms around the globe began to appear within a few years of the emergence of the Internet'*

appear within a few years of the emergence of the Internet. Early reports include the work of the Orillas Network (Cummins & Sayers, 1995), the AT&T Learning Circles (Riel, 1997), as well as more in-depth research studies into foreign language exchanges (Brammerts, 1996; Eck et al., 1995). The publication *Virtual Connections: Online Activities for Networking Language Learners* (Warschauer, 1995) included a collection of 'cross-cultural communication' projects which reported on foreign language students creating personal profiles, carrying out surveys and examining cultural stereotypes with distant partners. Around this time, a number of websites, including *Intercultural E-mail Classroom Connections* (IECC) and *E-Tandem*, also became available online in order to link up classrooms across the globe and to provide practitioners with activities and guidelines for their projects. The IECC listserv was established by university professors at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, USA and functioned as one of the first 'matching services' for teachers who wanted to connect their students in e-mail exchanges with partner classes

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in other countries and in other regions of their own country. Between 1992 and 2001, IECC distributed over 28,000 requests for e-mail partnerships. The E-tandem server was aimed at matching learners of foreign languages and was supported by a network of research and project work carried out at Trinity College in Dublin (O’Rourke, 2005). Meanwhile, practitioners such as Ruth Vilmi in Finland (Vilmi, 2000) and Reinhard Donath (Donath, 1997) in Germany helped to make the activity better known by publishing practical reports of their students’ work online. Vilmi’s work focused on online collaboration between technical students at universities across Europe, while Donath provided German secondary school foreign language teachers with a wide range of resources and information about how projects could be integrated into the curriculum.

### **3. DIFFERING APPROACHES**

#### **3.1 Managing Virtual Exchange**

Since its initial steps, Virtual Exchange has emerged as an educational tool in various

disciplines at different stages over the past 20 years and the practice has continued to evolve in different communities of practitioners and researchers who, in many cases, have been relatively unaware of the work of their counterparts in other disciplines. The consequences of this have included a certain degree of ‘reinventing the wheel’ in terms of methodology and tasks and also that there has been a superfluous number of terms to refer to the same overarching activity (Rubin & Guth, 2016). This, in turn, has often led to either confusion in the academic community or to a general lack of awareness of the actual scale and importance of this area of research and practice.

Nevertheless, a positive outcome has been that no one model has exclusively imposed itself as the way to engage in online intercultural exchanges and Virtual Exchange has been adapted and developed to attend to different needs and aims across numerous areas of education.

One possible categorisation of the different initiatives involves differentiating between subject-specific Virtual Exchanges, shared syllabus approaches and service-provider approaches. We will now look at each of these in some detail.

#### **3.1 Subject-specific Virtual Exchange – foreign language learning initiatives**

It is not surprising that one of the disciplines to most eagerly take up Virtual Exchange as a

learning tool has been foreign language education. From the beginnings of the Internet in the early 1990s, foreign language educators have seen the potential of connecting language learners with counterparts in other countries in order to engage them in interaction with native speakers of other languages and to give them semi-authentic experiences of communicating in these languages.

In foreign language education, Virtual Exchange has been referred to as *telecollaboration* (Belz, 2003), *telecollaboration 2.0* (Guth & Helm, 2010), *e-tandem* (O'Rourke, 2007) or *Online Intercultural Exchange* (O'Dowd, 2007; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016) and over the past 20 years it has gone on to become an integral part of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or Network-based Language Teaching (NBLT) (Kern et al., 2008). Virtual Exchange in foreign language education has traditionally taken the form of one of two models – each one reflecting the principal learning approaches prevalent in foreign language education at the time. The first well-known model was e-tandem, which focused on fostering learner autonomy and learners' ability to continue their language learning outside of the language classroom. The second model is usually referred to as *Intercultural Telecollaboration* or *Online Intercultural Exchange* (O'Dowd, 2007) and reflects the emphasis in the late 1990s and early 2000s on intercultural and sociocultural aspects of foreign language education.

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In the e-tandem model (O'Rourke, 2007), two native speakers of different languages communicate together with the aim of learning the other's language, and messages are typically written 50% in the target and 50% in the native language, thereby providing each partner with an opportunity to practise their target language and, at the same time, provide their partner with authentic input.

These exchanges are also based on the principle of autonomy, and the responsibility for a successful exchange rests mainly with the learners, who are expected to provide feedback on their partners' content and/or on their foreign language performance. In this sense, tandem partners take on the role of peer tutors who correct their

partners' errors and propose alternative formulations in the target language. The role of the tutor or class teacher in the e-tandem model is usually minimal. For example, learners are often encouraged to take on responsibility for finding their own themes for discussion, correcting their partners' errors, and keeping a learner diary or portfolio to reflect on their own learning progress.

The example below of an American student writing an email to her partner in Spain illustrates many of the key aspects of a typical e-tandem. The American student begins by writing in English and talking to her Spanish partner for his recent message. She then takes on the role of peer-tutor and provides some corrections of Pablo's English. Although she does not provide detailed grammatical feedback, she is able to suggest alternative correct formulations of his errors and she is sure to praise him for his writing in his foreign language.

In the second part of the message she then takes on the role of Spanish learner and tells her partner about student life in New York. It is likely that in the following message, Pablo will respond to Elena, providing some corrections to her Spanish and continuing the conversation.

*Hey Pablo!*

*It was great to receive your letter. I was so happy to see that you responded to my questions. Thank*

*you. Your responses were very informative and definitely showed me that family life in Spain was not all I'd expected it to be. (I was surprised, for example, that your family is not religious. I assumed that most families in Spain are, and I'm sure you have many assumptions about life in America as well).*

*Your English is very good. There are only a few problems that I have to correct. Some of your sentences are too long, and would make more sense if you separated them into two or three sentences instead. For example, 'My parents are not divorced in Spain there are very few cases of divorced' could be rewritten as 'My parents are not divorced. In Spain there are very few cases of divorce.' Your letter was great and made sense despite these things. Good work.*

*Las fiestas en the ciudad de Nueva York son muy locas y emocionantes. Voy a las discotecas con mis amigas los jueves, los viernes, o los sabados. Vamos a los bars tambien. Nosotros volvemos a nos salons de dormitorio a las cuatro de la mañana. Queremos bailar a las discotecas. Necesita tener veintiuno anos por beber el alcohol pero la mayoria de estudiantes en las universidades tenen los 'fake IDs' y ellos beben el alcohol ...*

Although the model is now over 20 years old, e-tandem continues to be a very popular form of

Virtual Exchange in foreign language education. A large amount of research on the outcomes of e-tandem learning continue to appear in the literature (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2001; O'Rourke, 2005; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011). Browsing the many partner-searches which appear on the UNICollaboration.eu platform for class matching reveals that many practitioners continue to look for e-tandem-style exchanges.

In the late 1990s a second model or approach to Virtual Exchange in foreign language education began to appear which was characterised by a stronger focus on intercultural aspects of language learning and communication and by a greater integration of the online exchanges into classroom activity. This form of Virtual Exchange was to become broadly known as '*telecollaboration*'.

The term was coined by Mark Warschauer in his publication *Telecollaboration and the Foreign Language Learner* (1996) and a special edition of the journal *Language Learning & Technology* was dedicated to the subject where Belz (2003) identified the main characteristics of foreign language telecollaboration to be '*institutionalised, electronically mediated intercultural communication under the guidance of a languacultural expert (i.e., teacher) for the purposes of foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence*' (Belz, 2003, p. 2).

The telecollaborative model of Virtual Exchange strives to integrate the online interaction comprehensively into the students' foreign language programs and involves international class-to-class partnerships in which intercultural projects and tasks are developed by partner teachers in the collaborating institutions. For example, students' contact classes are where online interaction and publications are prepared, analysed, and reflected upon with the guidance of the teacher. Foreign language telecollaboration also places the emphasis of the exchanges on developing intercultural awareness and other aspects of intercultural communicative competence, in addition to developing linguistic competence.

There is great variety in the type of tasks which educators have used to develop intercultural approaches to telecollaboration. Some of the better-known tasks involved requiring students to work together with their international partners to produce websites or presentations based on comparisons of their cultures. Belz (2002), for example, reports on a USA-German exchange which involved developing a website which contained bilingual essays and a bilingual discussion of a cultural theme such as racism or family. Another popular intercultural task for telecollaborative exchanges has been the analysis of parallel texts. Belz (2005) defines parallel texts as '*linguistically different renditions of a particular*

*story or topic in which culturally-conditioned varying representations of that story or topic are presented'* (Belz, 2005, p. 21). Popular examples of parallel texts which have been used in telecollaborative exchanges include the American film *Three men and a baby* and the French original *Trois hommes et un couffin*.

A further intercultural task adapted to telecollaboration was the application of ethnographic interviewing in synchronous online sessions. O'Dowd (2005) trained a group of German EFL students in the basic techniques of ethnographic interviewing and the students then carried out interviews with American informants in the USA using group-to-group videoconferencing sessions and one-to-one email exchanges before writing up reflective essays on their findings. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous tools allowed the students to develop different aspects of their intercultural competence. Videoconferencing was seen to develop students' ability to interact with members of the target culture under the constraints of real-time communication and also to elicit, through a face-to-face dialogue, the concepts and values which underlie their partners' behaviour and their opinions.

However, email was employed to both send and receive much more detailed information on the two cultures' products and practices as seen from

the partners' perspectives. In other words, e-mail was suited to foster cultural knowledge, while videoconferencing supported the development of students' intercultural negotiating skills.

The end of the 21st century's first decade has seen foreign language Virtual Exchange gradually diverge in two paths. The first of these paths has led telecollaborative exchanges away from formal language learning and engage learners in language and cultural learning experiences by immersing them in specialised online interest communities or environments that focus on specific hobbies or interests. Thorne (2010) describes this form of telecollaborative learning as '*intercultural communication in the wild*' and speculates that it may be '*situated in arenas of social activity that are less controllable than classroom or organised online intercultural exchanges might be, but which present interesting, and perhaps even compelling, opportunities for intercultural exchange, agentive action and meaning making*' (Thorne, 2010, p. 144).

The second, alternative path in foreign language Virtual Exchange involves attempts to integrate telecollaborative networks more comprehensively in formal education. The argument here is that if Virtual Exchange is such a valuable learning experience, then it should not be used as an 'add-on' activity but rather as a recognised, credit-carrying activity which is valued and supported by university management. Based on this belief,

reports have emerged of how universities are integrating Virtual Exchange into their study programs (O'Dowd, 2013), the use of alternative credit systems for students' telecollaborative work (Hauck & MacKinnon, 2016), and about the development of competence models for telecollaborative learning (Dooly, 2017) and for teachers engaged in telecollaborative exchanges (O'Dowd, 2015). Between 2011 and 2014 the INTENT project was financed by the European Commission to achieve greater awareness of telecollaboration around the academic world and to look for ways for its integration into university education. One of the main outcomes of this project was the UNICollaboration platform ([www.unicollaboration.eu](http://www.unicollaboration.eu)) where university educators and mobility coordinators could establish partnerships and find the resources necessary to set up telecollaborative exchanges. Since then, *UNICollaboration* has established itself as an academic organisation and holds regular bi-annual conferences for practitioners from all disciplines who are interested in Virtual Exchange.

### **3.2 Subject-specific Virtual Exchange – business studies initiatives**

Another discipline which has recognised the relevance and potential of Virtual Exchange is Business Studies, in particular in the areas of International Business and International Marketing. In modern business contexts, online communication is widely considered as offering a

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cost-effective way of conducting business, as a manner to reduce power differences in team work and to enable physically disadvantaged employees have greater access to the virtual environment than the physical workspace. As online communication becomes increasingly common in many organisations, a growing number of educators are looking to Virtual Exchange as a tool to prepare students of Business Studies to successfully work and collaborate online with colleagues and customers in other locations. The central interest here is in developing in students the necessary competences to work in what are commonly described as *Global Virtual Teams* (GVTs) and to give them first-hand experience in online international collaboration in professional contexts.

GVTs are defined as *'geographically dispersed teams that use Internet-mediated communication to collaborate on common goals, and typically consist of members who have diverse cultural backgrounds and who have not previously worked*

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*together in face-to-face settings’* (Taras et al., 2013).

A review of practice in this area would suggest that Virtual Exchange initiatives are, in comparison to foreign language telecollaboration, relatively scarce and under-researched, but the reports that do exist provide an insight into how Virtual Exchange is being introduced into the discipline. Duus and Cooray (2014), for example, describe a project for students of Marketing which brings together business students in the UK and India to take part in a simulation which involves working in online virtual teams and setting up a new business in India. Lindner (2016) reports on an exchange between business studies students at the University of Paderborn in Germany and Masaryk University in Brno in the Czech Republic which involved students collaborating online with their international partners to create a website which compared a product, service, or managerial innovation across two cultures.

Osland et al. (2004) present the *Globally Distant Multiple Teams* project (GDMT) which brought

groups of German, Austrian and American students together in virtual teams in online communication using e-mail, chat rooms, and other online communication tools. Students were asked to prepare a report or develop a website comparing a product, service, or organisational feature across their countries. For example, one group compared differing marketing approaches and consumer attitudes related to soft drinks in Germany and USA.

### **3.3 Shared syllabus approaches to Virtual Exchange**

Although it has been less well documented and researched, educators in other subject areas apart from foreign language education and Business Studies have also been engaging their students in Virtual Exchange initiatives since the beginnings of the Internet. Their motivation has been to give students in different universities the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills including intercultural competence and critical thinking, while working on shared subject content and also providing them with different cultural perspectives on their particular subject area (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008).

There is a growing number of examples of practitioners from different subject areas who are introducing Virtual Exchange into their classrooms. Vallance et al. (2015), for example, report on a project which engaged Japanese undergraduate

students and UK high school pupils in online collaboration to design and programme robots in both the real world and in virtual world simulations. However, in the area of the shared syllabus approaches to Virtual Exchange, there is one particular approach which has become dominant and that is *Collaborative Online International Learning* (COIL). Although this approach has existed for many years, the COIL model (as it is known today) was actually developed in 2004 by Jon Rubin and his colleagues at the State University of New York (SUNY) network of universities (Rubin & Guth, 2016). The COIL approach to Virtual Exchange involves connecting two or more classes of similar course content in different countries. Once connected, the instructors in the partner universities design course modules in a way that the two different student populations will engage in communication and collaboration together. Often, the two groups of students have to work together to discuss course materials, address a practical problem, or produce another type of grade-able product. Collaboration may occur synchronously (in real time) or asynchronously (not in real time) and students may connect via email, voice, video, or in some combination. (Wojenski, 2014).

The key difference between COIL exchanges and those that come from the foreign language or Business Studies traditions of Virtual Exchange

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is undoubtedly the emphasis which is put on examining different cultural and national experiences or interpretations of subject content. While foreign language telecollaboration, for example, usually takes language and culture as the content and focus of an exchange, COIL adds a collaborative and comparative perspective to the subject content by creating a shared syllabus which is worked on by all participating classes.

Of course, as is the case with subject specific Virtual Exchange, there is no one definitive COIL methodology. For example, in their volume which reports various COIL projects, Schultheis-Moore and Simon (2015) present examples of courses which are completely online and others which are blended in nature. They also include courses which have negotiated a complete common syllabus and assignments but they also report on projects which only come together to work on one particular assignment. In recent years, COIL has become one of the largest Virtual Exchange networks. There are currently 34 university members in the SUNY Global Partner Network

and these are engaged with other institutions in collaborative projects. Rubin reports that from 2006 to 2016 COIL also worked more occasionally with an additional 30-40 universities and that they are presently supporting at least 65 joint COIL courses, serving well over 2500 students (Rubin & Guth, 2016).

Although there is relatively little reported research on the learning outcomes of the COIL model, various reports of how the model works and examples of good practice are available. Rubin & Guth (2016) provide a broad introduction to the volume and its impact to date, while the volume by Schultheis-Moore and Simon (2015) provides a fascinating overview of examples of online exchange initiatives in the Humanities which have stemmed from the work of the COIL Centre. Contributions to this volume provide examples of how the shared curriculum model can be integrated effectively into the study of subject areas as diverse as jazz music, feminism, the diaspora, gender roles and human rights.

### **3.4 'Service-provider' approaches to Virtual Exchange**

We have looked at Virtual Exchange initiatives which have emerged from the work of individual teachers. However, there is also an important field of work being carried out by organisations which are dedicated to providing the curricula and online environments (and even, in some cases, the

educators) which universities may need to engage their students in Virtual Exchange.

This 'service-provider' approach to Virtual Exchange is actually quite common at all levels of education and various groups and organisations have been providing ready-made Virtual Exchange environments for primary and secondary education for many years. The oldest of these organisations is iEARN, a non-profit organisation which was founded in 1988 and is currently made up of over thirty thousand schools and youth organisations in more than 140 countries. iEARN reports that over two million students each day take part in their projects worldwide. The organisation offers over 150 pre-designed projects and provides online environments where educational institutions can sign on, choose the project which best suits their students' curriculum, and then participate with international partner classes to complete the activities.

Although iEARN caters principally for students in pre-university education, there are various other Virtual Exchange 'providers' which attend exclusively to higher education institutions. In contrast to the practitioner-driven approaches which generally rely on the teachers of the classes to organise and lead the exchange, these providers use 'facilitator-led' models which involve trained intercultural educators leading the online discussions and facilitating the intercultural

learning. One of the best-known of these models is the *Soliya Connect* programme, which brings students from West into dialogue with students from the Muslim world with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others around the world on important socio-political issues and also to develop critical thinking, intercultural communication and media literacy skills (Helm, 2016).

Each iteration of the project connects more than 200 students from more than 30 different universities in the United States, Europe and the predominantly Arab and/or Muslim worlds. Students are placed into small groups and guided through an eight-week, English language dialogue programme by pairs of trained facilitators. Students receive credit from their local institution for participating in the project, even though the facilitators and the online exchange environment are contracted from the *Soliya* organisation by the different universities.

Since its establishment in 2003, *Soliya* has worked with well over 100 institutions and boasts over ten thousand activated alumni from 28 countries. They have also trained over 1,300 young people to work as professional online facilitators since 2003. Although the initiative started as an attempt to promote West/Arab dialogue in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks in the USA, *Soliya* has gone on to broaden its curriculum in order to

attend to other areas, such as 21st century skills (e.g. cross-cultural communication, collaborative problem solving, team work, etc.) that enable participants to engage with differences more positively and to become active global citizens.

*Soliya's* Virtual Exchange programme contains various characteristics which differentiates it from 'traditional' class-to-class Virtual Exchange set ups which we have seen until now. Firstly, communication takes place through synchronous videoconferencing on a specially designed platform. Students take part in a two-hour videoconference every week for eight weeks and this makes up the core of the programme. Students are allocated to small groups of 8 to 10 for interaction, if possible with an equal division between participants from the 'West' and the 'predominantly Arab and Muslim world,' so that they can be exposed to a multiplicity of diverse viewpoints.

However, the most distinctive of the *Soliya's* characteristics is undoubtedly the role of the facilitator who takes part in all the online sessions and whose role it is to create a safe dialogic space for learning and to ensure that the dialogue process is constructive and meaningful.

*Soliya* also follows a structured eight-week program which ensures that, as relationships develop, participants are able to explore difficult

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conversations and gain critical awareness on their peers and themselves in the process. The *Soliya* curriculum also has clear education goals and a specific structure to help groups reach their learning objectives and to ensure that certain learning components on cross-cultural communication are a part of everyone’s dialogue process. However, the format of the curriculum is semi-structured, thereby providing space for each group to discuss issues that are important to those young people in question.

Finally, the online interface that is used by *Soliya* in its Virtual Exchange programs has been custom-made for dialogue. This ensures that the technology facilitates diverse dialogue and supports inclusive discussions where everyone is able to be heard.

Another example of a Virtual Exchange ‘service provider’ has been pioneered by the *Sharing Perspectives Foundation*, which is a non-profit

organisation dedicated to providing students and academics with opportunities to collaboratively study contemporary themes related to the subjects of political science, law, economics and social science.

Their model of Virtual Exchange works in the following way:

*Providing academic content.* Participating universities construct a shared curriculum which is presented through video lectures by the participating educators.

*Online discussion.* After watching the video lecture assigned for that particular week, students come together in subgroups of one student per participating university in a web-based videoconference room. Here, they discuss the lecture of that week. These discussions are hosted by professionally trained facilitators.

*Engaging in collaborative research.* Students are then required to collaboratively design, conduct and share survey research about the topic in their own communities to learn about the broader societal impact of the topic.

A recent example of a *Sharing Perspectives* project is *Perspectives on the Euro(pean) Crisis*, which involved eight partner universities with funding from the European Commission. The project

explored the causes of and possible solutions to the European crisis and was structured around the major economic, political and sociocultural challenges that were at stake in the European Union. The exchange lasted 16 weeks and included two video lectures a week, mostly contributed by the partner universities; a two-hour weekly dialogue session with 8 to 10 students from each university in the group which was led by trained facilitators; and a research component, with participants carrying out three surveys and gathering responses from peers and young people in their countries. Selected participants from each university were then invited to Brussels to present the research results. Students who successfully complete *Sharing Perspectives* projects are usually awarded 5 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) grades for their work by their local institutions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The review of different Virtual Exchange initiatives and models which has been presented here provides an insight into the great variety and richness of work which is currently going on in the field. Of course, on a general level, all the initiatives can be seen to share a basic educational approach which involves a commitment to experiential learning, collaborative critical enquiry and cross-curricular learning (Cummins & Sayers, 1995); and all would also share common educational goals such as the development of

transversal skills, digital literacies, intercultural awareness and the ability to live and work together with people from other cultural backgrounds (Guth & Helm, 2010). The initiatives also appear to have encountered the same problems and challenges as they seek to expand their practice to greater numbers of classrooms and institutions. These include students having limited access to technology, limited digital competences of teachers, time-differences hindering synchronous communication and institutional resistance to the inter-institutional approach to learning which Virtual Exchange can involve (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008; O'Dowd, 2013).

Differences between the models emerge at the level of organisational structure behind the initiatives. There is a clear difference, for example, between practitioner-led approaches such as the foreign language telecollaboration models outlined above, shared syllabus approaches such as COIL and the service-provider initiatives such as *Soliya* and *Sharing Perspectives*. Inevitably, each approach can be seen to have its strong and weak points. Practitioner-led initiatives are developed by teachers who believe passionately in the underlying principles and aims of Virtual Exchange and therefore these models are likely to grow in a slow, but steady bottom-up fashion.

On the other hand, approaches such as COIL will benefit from the institutional support provided by

university management and are likely to receive the funding and training necessary to integrate Virtual Exchange on a large scale across an institution. However, the belief and support of senior management cannot guarantee the passionate belief and motivation of the teaching staff to this approach to learning.

Finally, service provider approaches provide a valuable service to educational institutions, providing their students with well-designed frameworks of trained facilitators, partnerships and tasks which they can access without needing staff from the institutions themselves to be knowledgeable in this area. In this sense, they provide an excellent supplementary educational resource which can complement students' regular studies without actually needing to be integrated into course syllabi. However, as was pointed out earlier, these initiatives are likely to have serious issues of sustainability as they continue to grow in popularity.

Inevitably, it is likely that Virtual Exchange will continue to grow in different directions, depending

on practitioner-driven, institutionally-led and outsourced initiatives. The important issue is that the practitioners and promoters of these different forms of Virtual Exchange work closer together to promote the overall goal of increasing the number of students who benefit from online intercultural exchange as part of their university education.

In conclusion, the future of Virtual Exchange would appear to be bright yet still unclear in many respects. While it is clearly beginning to gain recognition at national and trans-national policy-making levels, there is still a lack of communication and coordination among the many initiatives and organisations and this undoubtedly hinders the further dissemination of this educational approach among the wider academic community. Agreeing to use one term, such as Virtual Exchange, may be a first step in the right direction, but even this proposal is likely to be rejected by many of the practitioners mentioned in this article. Further steps may include organising joint conferences and research initiatives with representatives of all the initiatives and organisations mentioned here.

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