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Virtual Exchange: Get connected while staying in place!

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If you're interested in connecting your language learners with other users of the language to gain linguistic, cultural, and content knowledge, virtual exchange may be the right approach. Consider the following points as you get started.

1. There are many terms used to describe this learning context

As virtual exchange has developed in various independent contexts over the past 20+ years, there are many terms that have been used to describe this learning context, including *telecollaboration*, *online intercultural exchange*, *collaborative online international learning (COIL)*, and *globally networked learning*. In the end, the common element among all of these terms is the presence of (in most cases) two geographically distant groups using Internet-based technology to work and learn together under the guidance of an expert facilitator.

2. There are many forms of virtual exchange

Just as the terminology surrounding virtual exchange can vary, so do the forms that virtual exchange can take. The “classic” form of virtual exchange involves a partnership between two classes/teachers, in which the learners communicate synchronously and/or asynchronously to complete tasks and achieve a set of pre-determined learning outcomes; however, experienced practitioners often design their own exchanges in specific pedagogical contexts. Here are some models of virtual exchange that have been used extensively over the years:

Cultura (cultural.mit.edu) is an intercultural exchange project that focuses on helping students to better understand one another's culture through the use of activities such as word association, sentence completion, and (a)synchronous discussion of cultural phenomena.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (coil.suny.edu) is an approach that focuses more explicitly on the development of content knowledge by linking university or college classes in different countries. Here instructors work to develop a common syllabus that emphasizes experiential and collaborative student learning.

Teletandem (teletandembrasil.org) is an approach that foregrounds oral communication between individual exchange participants through the use of videoconferencing tools such as Skype or Google Hangouts. Hour-long conversations are split into two halves, during which each language is spoken. In this way, both participants have the experience of being the language "expert" and "novice," respectively.

3. Pedagogy informs technology

Although Internet-based communication is central to the practice of virtual exchange, pedagogical decisions should always drive the design and execution of virtual exchange. For example, if an instructor decides that the cultural learning afforded by a Cultura-style exchange would enrich a particular course, then decisions regarding which particular platform to use for posting to discussion threads should be informed by pedagogical considerations, including the selection of topics, the sequencing of tasks and the assessment of learning outcomes.

Another critical component that separates virtual exchange from Internet-mediated intercultural exchange "in the wild" is the presence of an expert facilitator (in most cases the teacher). The facilitator's roles may include providing logistical and technical support, but above all, s/he should be ready to help exchange participants mediate and reflect on their experiences in the virtual exchange learning context.

4. Organizing and planning are essential

Organizing and planning are two aspects of a telecollaboration that cannot be overlooked. In essence, the goal is for two partner classes with disparate academic calendars and institutional frameworks to align their instruction in such a way that both classes benefit from the exchange, while also meeting the learning objectives associated with the respective educational contexts. This is no mean feat!

Planning begins by finding an appropriate partner for the virtual exchange. If no partner is available through your personal and academic networks, consider using a partner-finding service, such as:

UniCollaboration: Virtual Exchange Partner Finding Tool
<https://www.unicollaboration.org/index.php/finding-a-ve-partner/>

Once you've connected with an appropriate partner teacher, you can negotiate the pedagogical and technical aspects of the exchange. Because this process can be time consuming, especially when setting up new exchanges, you should allow for several months planning time prior to the actual start of the virtual exchange.

There are an increasing number of "off the shelf" options for those who want to participate in virtual exchange, but are limited in their ability to set up their own exchanges. These include:

Soliya (<https://www.soliya.net/>) is a non-profit organization that, through its Connect Program, provides a platform for synchronous discussion of topics that often cause division across national, cultural, religious, and/or ideological boundaries. By transcending these barriers through mediated dialogue, participants can uncover biases and arrive at a better understanding of the interconnections in our world.

Empatico (<https://empatico.org/>) is a free tool that connects 5th-12th grade classrooms throughout the world. The platform helps you to find a partner class, provides activity plans, as well as video, messaging, and scheduling tools.

The Experiment Digital (<https://www.experiment.org/digital>) is a platform that seeks to connect young people in the USA with peers in the Middle East and North Africa Region through eight-week summer virtual exchange experiences. During the virtual exchange, participants complete modules related to digital citizenship, leadership and identity, community initiatives, and public narrative.

5. Be ready for speed bumps along the way

Just as when undertaking any complex endeavor for the first time, you should expect that there will be a learning curve. Additionally, tensions can arise from interpersonal dynamics, differential levels of participation, or institutional constraints. The best way to mitigate these potential difficulties is by having a solid plan, a good relationship with the partner teacher and a willingness to work through any problems encountered during the exchange. At the conclusion of the collaboration, the partner teachers should reflect on the successes and challenges of the previous weeks, and if intending to continue the partnership, should implement measures that address any problematic areas identified during the exchange.

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