

# Virtual Exchange between Cross-Cultural Teams: A Sustainable Path to the Internationalization of College Courses

*Massimo Verzella, Pennsylvania State University*

## **Author's Contact Information**

*Massimo Verzella, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of English Composition, English  
130 Kochel, 0001 Irvin Kochel Center, Behrend  
Erie, PA 16563  
Phone: 814-898-7011  
Email: [muv56@psu.edu](mailto:muv56@psu.edu)*

## **Abstract:**

*Considering that only a small percentage of students can afford the cost of study abroad programs, it is important to appreciate how collaborative projects that link classes from geographically distant places can be organized at no cost for students and institutions. The umbrella term for this type of collaborative projects is “virtual exchange.” While a certain degree of diffidence for virtual exchange initiatives is due to difficulties of integrating these projects with traditional syllabi and uncertainties on how to evaluate students who collaborate in cross-cultural virtual teams, the benefits for students have been widely documented. Among the most dynamic organizations that promote cultural exchange are the INTENT consortium (through the Unicollaboration platform at [uni-collaboration.eu](http://uni-collaboration.eu)) and the TAPP network. These organizations have promoted the creation of projects that have helped students develop intercultural competencies, communication skills in English as a lingua franca, and digital literacy. Importantly, projects like those developed through Unicollaboration or TAPP are not hampered by red tape and bureaucracy, and represent a more sustainable path to the internationalization of a wide range of college courses. Finally, virtual exchange initiatives foster global citizenship, intercultural awareness, and cosmopolitan open-mindedness in times characterized by a resurgence of petty nationalism and particularism.*

## **Key Words:**

Internationalization, intercultural competence, virtual exchange, pedagogy, English as a lingua franca, Globalization, cross-cultural virtual teams, intercultural communication, Internationalization at home.

## **Fostering intercultural competence**

Mission statements of most U.S. universities contain references to the importance of internationalization and global understanding. We often read that the goal of higher education is to forge professionals who can succeed in a diverse, global, and interdependent society. Educators generally agree that to succeed in a global society students should develop their intercultural competence, which can be defined as “the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways” (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003, p. 422). While definitions of intercultural competence may vary, Perry and Southwell (2011) observe that most scholars place emphasis on four dimensions related to intercultural competence: Attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviors. Positive attitudes such as empathy, curiosity, and respect stimulate individuals to develop their knowledge of unfamiliar cultures. In turn, knowledge and understanding are conducive to the development of communication skills and behavioral flexibility. The main premise of this paper is that teachers can foster intercultural competence by inviting students to cultivate an attitude of curiosity and openness for difference and otherness. To achieve this goal, teachers should cooperate with both local and translocal/transnational organizations to internationalize programs and curricula.

The most visible initiative enacted to foster intercultural competence is student mobility. However, there are two main problems connected to study-abroad programs. The first is cost: only a small percentage of students can afford or are willing to take out more loans to cover for the expenses. An Open Door survey published in 2017 (Institute of International Education) revealed that only about 10 percent of all U.S. undergraduate students will study abroad by the time they graduate. This means that study-abroad initiatives are rarely a viable path for the non-mobile majority of students, who also have a right to be offered opportunities to develop their intercultural competencies (Crowther et al., 2000; Beelen & Jones, 2015). The second problem is that study abroad experiences do not always contribute to the achievement of pedagogical goals. As Anderson and Lawton (2011) report, doubts on the pedagogical effectiveness of study abroad experiences have prompted calls for new methods to assess the quality of these programs. Groups of students who travel abroad for short-term programs (a month or less) rarely mix with local people to complete meaningful activities or to experience everyday life in a foreign country. Many U.S. students keep using English throughout their experience abroad because they do not feel the urge to socialize with local people using the local language.

Another problem that can affect the quality of internationalization efforts has to do with how administrators and teachers understand the goals for these initiatives. Pragmatic goals such as preparing students to become employable in multinational companies should never overshadow our ethical obligation to educate students to become open and sensitive global citizens (Killick, 2017; Pashby & Andreotti, 2016; Watkins & Smith, 2018). Intercultural competence cannot be reductively understood as a set of skills that allow students to work more efficiently or become more productive in the global market society. Rather, educators should emphasize the affective dimension of intercultural competence with its emphasis on open-mindedness, tolerance, curiosity, and respect for otherness and difference. In other words, it is important to act on the way in which learners construe cultural difference. As Bennett (1986) points out,

learners should be directed towards a developmental journey that leads them from denial of difference and defense against difference to acceptance of difference, adaptation, and integration. In Bennett's model it is at the stage of acceptance that individuals develop empathy, whose behavioral manifestation is "action that is more appropriate to the 'target' culture than to the native culture" (1986, p. 185).

### **Internationalization-at-home**

Faced with the problem that mobility programs typically benefit socially advantaged students at the expense of less privileged groups (Brooks & Waters, 2011), universities and grassroots organizations of teachers have been making efforts to promote internationalization-at-home (IaH), defined as on-campus programs and initiatives that connect students from different cultural backgrounds. The main difference between IaH and internationalization abroad is that IaH can engage all students, especially if these initiatives are conducted in general education courses like English composition in the U.S. or English as a foreign language courses offered in institutions overseas. Furthermore, IaH initiatives tend to be more sustainable than mobility programs for two main reasons. First, they do not involve expenses related to travel and lodging. Second, they are not hampered and limited by bureaucratic constraints. IaH initiatives are relatively easy to implement as long as teachers are willing to establish connections with colleagues at foreign universities who are also interested in developing international projects. As a large-scale study conducted by Soria and Troisi (2014) shows, IaH activities can stimulate the development of students' intercultural competencies "as much as – if not more than – traditional study/travel abroad" (p. 273). In other words, there is no reason to consider IaH as the poor sister of mobility programs, especially when we consider the opportunities for pedagogical innovation and experimentation that are tied to the promotion of IaH.

In a position paper on IaH, Crowther et al. (2000) observe that "the introduction of international and intercultural elements into the curriculum may influence the content (and even goals) of university education over a longer period of time and for a larger number of students and be more effective than mere student mobility" (p. 21). According to the authors, an internationalized curriculum should aim to develop both students' cognitive abilities and their intercultural competence. Strategies to achieve this objective include the recruitment of teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds; the organization of guest lectures by speakers of local immigrant communities; a sustained effort to invite international students and immigrant students to contribute more actively to class activities and discussions; the involvement of students in diverse cultural organizations (Knight, 2008); the development of courses in area and regional studies; the development of foreign language programs; and the use of technology to facilitate virtual exchange.

Rather than assessing strategies for IaH at the program level, this paper will review the work of two different networks of teachers that collaborate to organize international projects that link English learners overseas with students enrolled in English composition or upper division writing courses in U.S. colleges. However, before discussing on types and goals of international projects, it is important to underline, with Beelen and Jones (2015), that IaH does not necessarily involve a collaboration with students from partner institutions abroad. Teachers of English composition who do not

feel ready to link their classes with classes overseas might identify other ways to internationalize their courses. For example, they can select readings that focus on global issues, develop assignments that invite students to compose texts for non-native speakers of English, or they could introduce students to the topics of language variation and change. Spending time on language variation is particularly important because students should learn how to shuttle between varieties, functions, and registers of English to accommodate diverse audiences (Canagarajah, 2006; Tardy, 2011). While it is crucial that students learn about the prestige forms, they also need to be exposed to variation and language difference so that they can understand how all acts of communication involve “translation inter and intra languages, media, modality during seeming iterations of dominant conventions as well as deviations from the norm” (Lu & Horner, 2016, p. 208). I agree with Donahue (2018) that writing programs administrators should promote a shift from pedagogies informed by monolingual assumptions to pedagogies that emphasize linguistic flexibility and an understanding of difference in language as a resource for producing meaning in different contexts of verbal interaction (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011).

Within the range of strategies for laH, this paper will focus on virtual exchange in English composition and upper division writing courses in the U.S. and English as a foreign language classes in Europe. The next section of this paper will offer a definition and explanation of virtual exchange projects. The central sections will review virtual exchange initiatives conducted by two different international groups of teachers. The final part of the paper will discuss the pedagogical benefits that come from organizing virtual exchange projects. The key goal of this paper is to add to the discussion concerning innovative strategies that can help non-mobile students to develop intercultural competence.

### **Virtual exchange**

“Virtual exchange” is an umbrella term that O’Dowd (2018) has recently proposed to use to designate a wide range of collaborative projects that link classes in different countries. Virtual exchange initiatives often stem within the area of foreign language education with educators connecting language learners with counterparts in other countries. According to O’Dowd (2018), the two main models for virtual exchange in foreign language education are:

The tandem model, which pairs up speakers of different languages so that they can remotely interact to improve their communication skills in two different languages. In this model, the role of teachers is minimal because students organize their exchanges autonomously.

The telecollaboration model, which is a more structured type of collaboration based on the writing and editing of texts. Educators who opt for telecollaboration invite students to develop text-based digital products (different genres of writing, translations, videos, etc.) that are analyzed during class meetings with the supervision of the teacher. In this model, the teacher’s role as language and communication expert is more prominent.

The organization of these exchanges is often left to individual teachers who are open to experimentation because it is difficult to implement international projects when

the majority of teachers find it hard to make a space for them in traditional syllabi or to solve problems related to the evaluation of students who collaborate in cross-cultural virtual teams (CCVT). In addition, many teachers might not see the value of exposing their students to non-standard Englishes in keeping with a monolingual ideology that is at odds with today's polycentric and translingual world (Horner, NeCamp, & Donahue, 2011). Another dilemma that teachers face is whether to incorporate virtual exchange as add-on activities or credit-carrying projects that ask students to produce deliverables that will be graded. The problem with credit-carrying projects is that the collaboration between two or more partner classes in different countries can go wrong for many reasons. Problems can arise due to the different organization of curricula (May, Wold, & Moore, 2015), different class schedules and attendance policies, and different levels of commitment on the part of students. The two linked classes might have different learning outcomes or pedagogical goals; semesters might start at different times (for example, the fall semester starts in October in many Italian universities); the two groups of students might have different levels of commitment to the collaborative project depending on the grading weight of the assignment; finally, access to internet, computers or software can also affect the level of student engagement.

However, we must recognize that problems, challenges, and misunderstandings are an integral part of projects that reproduce the conditions under which professionals work today when they collaborate in CCVTs (Maylath et al., 2013). International collaboration requires an ability to manage the complexity generated by diversity, interdependence, ambiguity, and flux (Maznevski, Steger, & Amann, 2007). Teachers cannot expect that all their students will be adept at effectively managing projects with one or more partners abroad, especially when these projects include multiple components and tasks that all team members need to complete in a timely manner. Moreover, there is always a possibility that students withdraw from courses after they have been assigned a partner and the collaboration has started. For these reasons, it is advisable that teachers interested in virtual exchange agree on being flexible with organization and student evaluation. The weight for assignments based on virtual exchange should not exceed 20% of the final grade, unless the classes involved are tightly connected because they share syllabi.

A survey launched by INTENT (Integrative Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Education), a group of scholars whose research was funded by the European Commission for Lifelong Learning, shows that teachers who organize virtual exchange initiatives tend to establish links between classes in Europe and classes in the U.S. (Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2014). Among the main pedagogical goals for the international projects, the informants mention the development of intercultural competence and foreign language skills, with secondary goals being developing digital literacy and encouraging autonomous learning. As concerns the students surveyed, they mostly understand the value of international projects even if they do not always receive credit for their participation.

While the growing body of research on virtual exchange — research that can now be shared in *The Journal of Virtual Exchange* and a dedicated conference — offers precious insight for instructors who want to develop international projects, there appears to be a tendency to focus on the benefits of these projects for language learners. The

fact that scholars and practitioners tend to underestimate the value of virtual exchange projects for native speakers of English becomes evident when we analyze the very definitions offered for different types of virtual exchange. For example, Belz (2003) defines telecollaboration as a form of electronically mediated intercultural communication established “for the purposes of foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence” (p. 2). It would be important to integrate this definition by emphasizing the importance for native speakers to develop their intercultural competence and their understanding of communication in English as a lingua franca, especially when we consider that many interactions between native and non-native speakers of English are marked by phenomena of ‘unilateral idiomaticity’ (Seidlhofer, 2002, 2009). Briefly, unilateral idiomaticity occurs when native speakers fail to adjust their communicative strategies based on an assessment of their interlocutors’ knowledge of a particular variety of English. A truly international university should invite students, faculty, and staff who are native speakers of English to adjust their use of language to accommodate a very diverse student population. In particular, regular seminars on the use of English as a lingua franca and the dynamics of intercultural communication should be organized to train teachers to find effective ways to engage all of their students.

### **The INTENT consortium and the Unicollaboration platform**

Among the most dynamic organizations that promote cultural exchange are the INTENT (Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education) consortium and the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific (TAPP) network. The first part of this section will focus on INTENT, the second part on TAPP.

We owe the INTENT consortium to a group of European teachers who want to promote virtual exchange. INTENT is the driving force behind the Unicollaboration platform, a website that allows teachers and mobility coordinators to establish links with counterparts abroad who share their vision. Unicollaboration is a user-friendly online resource that allows teachers to read about projects that have been organized in the past, exchange questions, share experiences, as well as gather ideas for the evaluation and grading of collaborative projects. Registered users can easily find opportunities for collaboration by clicking on the link Partners and then selecting Classes. By following this procedure, teachers can easily discover whether there are teachers in universities abroad who are interested in organizing a bilateral (or sometimes multilateral) project.

The members of the INTENT consortium published a position paper (2014) that defines virtual exchanges as “technology-enabled, sustained, people to people education programs” (sect. 1). These programs link students from partner classes in geographically distant locations so that they can collaborate in projects that “foster intercultural dialogue, the development of digital and critical literacies as well as foreign language skills” (sect. 1). The authors hold that virtual exchange models “can substantially improve cross-cultural empathy and understanding; increase critical thinking, intercultural communication and collaboration skills; and increase participants’ capacity to collaborate as part of diverse teams” (sect. 3). In terms of equity of access, when compared to trips abroad, virtual exchange allows all interested students to participate, thus increasing the diversity of participants. At the same time, virtual collaboration can spark an interest in study abroad programs, which are too often

pitched to students who lack the background knowledge that makes them appreciate the importance of intercultural exchange.

### **The Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project (TAPP)**

Another group of teachers who organize virtual exchanges based on writing/translation projects are connected through the TAPP (Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project) network. The TAPP, launched in 1999 by Bruce Maylath and Sonia Vandepitte, is a grassroots organization that promotes cross-cultural collaboration. The most typical project organized by TAPP members pairs up students enrolled in technical writing classes in the U.S. with translation classes offered at many universities overseas (Humbley, Maylath, Mousten, Vandepitte, Veisblat, 2005; Maylath, Vandepitte, & Mousten, 2008; Mousten, Vandepitte, & Maylath, 2008; Mousten, Humbley, Maylath, & Vandepitte, 2012). Students usually collaborate one-to-one in international pairs, but when the numbers in each class are not identical (a likely scenario), students collaborate in groups of two, three, or four.

This is how the project works: After a first stage devoted to establishing contacts and socialize (using email and social media), students in the U.S. compose technical instructions (the source text) and then prepare them for translation. At this stage, students in the U.S. are invited to reflect on the challenges of translation in order to select appropriate strategies for the cultural and linguistic editing of their works. Cultural editing includes revising date formats, units of measurements, symbols, acronyms, forms of address, references to local culture, and legal information, but also assessing photos and illustrations to make sure they are as bias free as possible (Hoft, 1995, pp. 129-130). Linguistic editing can be even more challenging because there is no standard written English lingua franca, no go-to controlled language used across the world to share technical content. Some multinational companies and transnational industries (aviation, for example) do use controlled languages (Kuhn, 2014), but it is not possible to find one global standard for technical English. Nevertheless, students and professionals can follow very helpful guidelines like those collected by Kohl in *The global English style guide* (2008), a book that many TAPP members include in the reading list for their students. Among the key suggestions offered by Kohl are to avoid using noun clusters, i.e. long sequences of nouns stacked one after the other without prepositions, and make sentence structure as explicit as possible by reintroducing 'syntactic cues' like the word that in the sentence "Ensure that the power switch is turned off" (Kohl, 2008, p. 13). As soon as students are introduced to these strategies, they seem to have moments of epiphany concerning the ambiguity of the language they use every day and the importance of evaluating strategies that can facilitate the correct interpretation and translation of documentation.

As they work on source texts created by students in the U.S., translators in partner universities overseas ask questions to the authors (by email or using Google docs messaging services) to better comprehend technical content. This type of exchange with translators allows writers to understand what parts of their text are likely to cause problems to translators. Writers who are willing to negotiate solutions with translators are usually able to revise the source texts in a very efficient way to produce improved (clearer) drafts. By going through this process of negotiation, students majoring in a variety of disciplines understand the importance of considering translators and

localization experts as beta-testers who can offer a key contribution in the development of products, software, websites, and technical documentation by offering timely feedback on issues related to usability in a cyclical, iterative way.

Some TAPP members have been particularly active in designing new projects. For example, Tommaso and Verzella (2018) connected a first-year writing class at Penn State Erie with an English as a foreign language class (intermediate level) class offered at Molise University in Italy. The students in the U.S. were asked to act as target audience and editors. The students in Italy analyzed their target audience (by asking their peers in the U.S. to complete a survey), and then composed a touristic booklet to promote the Molise region in central Italy. Early drafts of the booklet were then shared with the peer-reviewers at Penn State Erie through Google Docs. The feedback received from the students in the U.S. allowed the authors to revise several parts of the booklet to enhance its rhetorical effectiveness.

### **Virtual exchange beyond English classes**

It is important to underline that virtual exchange projects can connect several types of classes in a variety of disciplines. Students majoring in health care fields will often interact with patients who speak languages other than English or patients who ask for multilingual documentation on medical procedures or therapies. For this reason, they need to acquire intercultural competencies that allow them to understand that technical information has to be designed and shared in a way that guarantees accessibility to all population groups. To offer another example, students of marketing in the U.S. would benefit from collaborating with students of marketing from one or more countries overseas to understand how rhetorical strategies for persuasion have to be adjusted to diverse audiences.

Teachers of many different university courses often ask students to assess their audience before they develop a proposal, a report, an infographic, or an advertising campaign, but all too often the implied readers for these assignments are tacitly identified in members of the local community, native speakers of English who share values and cultural background with the writers. The question is whether this kind of instruction prepares native speakers for the challenges presented by the forces of globalization. In contrast, virtual exchange projects offer an opportunity to develop communication strategies in more complex contexts of interaction, contexts in which the goal is to exchange ideas with interlocutors from many different cultural backgrounds.

Further proof of the benefits of virtual exchange in disciplines other than English composition, technical writing, or English language teaching comes from an influential study conducted by Taras et al. (2013) that involved 3,000 students in 40 different countries. The authors' goal was to determine the effectiveness of virtual exchange projects in international management education. Findings show that these projects allow students to perform better on course examinations, and have the potential to improve students' future performance (p. 430). Importantly, the students involved understood the importance of avoiding stereotyping and prejudice, a key affective component of intercultural competence, and they gained experience in the art of mediation by coordinating tasks, negotiating roles and leadership, and exchanging ideas in a respectful and caring manner.



## Takeaways from virtual exchange

The overarching goal of virtual exchange projects is to help students develop intercultural competence. A related goal, connected to digital literacy, is to invite students to reflect on the impact of different tools on collaboration and exchange. More specifically, the extensive literature on TAPP projects (for a recent collection of essays on TAPP projects see Moustén, Vandepitte, Arnó, & Maylath, 2018) shows that students who participate to virtual exchange do not simply learn skills. Rather, they gradually move from defensive attitudes and a distrust for cultural traditions that are perceived as foreign to a keen desire to explore unfamiliar languages and traditions. This new-found curiosity for unfamiliar cultures does not stop at the acceptance of difference, but accompanies students through a process of discovery that leads them to appreciate how commonalities between cultures are far more real and relevant than perceived barriers that allegedly divide people.

On the more pragmatic level of skills, students involved in TAPP projects learn:

- How to become more responsible for their own learning.
- How to adjust their use of English to interact with diverse audiences.
- How to tailor writing strategies to the needs of a composite set of audiences speaking different languages.
- How to manage complex projects.
- How to work effectively in CCVTs (cross-cultural virtual teams).
- How to use a variety of communication platforms (e.g. email, instant messaging, video conferencing, Google Drive, Google Docs, etc.) to exchange information and collaborate to complete writing projects.
- How to involve translators in the writing process to receive feedback on the clarity of different types of writing.
- How to fine-tune their critical skills by assessing their peers' work.

Writers who receive requests for clarification from translators understand how their writing strategies and rhetorical moves are a product of conventions anchored in their native lingua-cultures. For example, the author of a set of technical instructions, a native speaker of American English, was surprised to see how his translator partner in Italy was concerned about using the formal equivalent for *kill*, i.e. *uccidere*, in the sentence “Start with plants that are more difficult to kill” (Verzella 2017). The translator felt that a set of instructions on how to grow a vegetable garden was not the right linguistic environment for a verb like *kill*. For this reason, the original sentence was rendered as “Inizia con piante che muoiono meno facilmente” (back translation: “Start with plants that do not easily die”). The takeaway for students, in this case, was that even technical communication entails acts of rhetorical mediation because language is never neutral, but always embodies and reflects ways of thinking and cultural biases (Cushman, 2016). Self-reflexivity, as Willard-Traub (2018) points out, is a key takeaway from cross-cultural collaborative projects: Faced with different perspectives on writing, meaning

making, and rhetorical appropriateness, students start engaging their motivations and biases.

Reporting on a project that connected a Technical Communication course in the U.S. with a Translation course in Belgium, Gonzales and Vandepitte (2017) observe that U.S. students learned to appreciate how content is processed and accessed by users who speak languages other than English. In turn, student from Belgium gradually understood why they should always think critically about the source text, which entails making editing changes that facilitate translation while improving the usability of the target text in a new locale. Focusing on pedagogical outcomes for students in the U.S., Maylath, Vandepitte, and Mousten (2008) observe that questions asked by the translators helped the writers understand how their writing choices affect readers, especially in a cross-cultural exchange (p. 65). Teaching audience awareness and audience analysis in a vacuum is rarely helpful for students because they need to face real questions related to the interpretation of their writing to fully understand how to exercise more control on the process of meaning making. Yet another study by Tzoannopoulou and Maylath (2018) reports on a virtual exchange between students in a journalism course in Greece and students enrolled in a technical writing course in the U.S. The authors found that by the end of the project all students involved appeared to be more interested in developing their intercultural competence.

## **Conclusion**

The mission statements of many U.S. universities include references to the importance of preparing students to collaborate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, all too often internationalization efforts are limited to the recruitment of foreign students or the organization of study abroad programs. The problem is that proximity is not always a guarantee of intercultural exchange, considering that college students tend to assemble in cliques based on national origin or language background. As concerns study abroad, only a small percentage of students can afford the cost of trips that are often too short to yield pedagogical benefits. In contrast, virtual exchange initiatives are not difficult to organize, cost nothing to universities, and lead to the development of a wide range of projects to achieve diverse pedagogical goals in many different disciplines.

Projects like those developed through Unicollaboration or TAPP are not hampered by excessive bureaucracy and represent a more sustainable path to the internationalization of higher education. All it takes for teachers in the U.S., for example, is to establish connections with teachers abroad who are interested in developing collaborative projects. International conferences offer a great opportunity to meet with colleagues from universities abroad, but partnerships can also be established through online platforms like Unicollaboration or by using the online environments provided by organizations like iEarn or service providers like the Sharing Perspective Foundation (O'Dowd, 2018).

The most important rationale for implementing virtual exchange projects is that these projects stimulate students' curiosity for unfamiliar cultures, an affective disposition that stimulates the development of intercultural competence by accompanying students through their journey from denial of difference to acceptance and even celebration of

cultural diversity. The goal of internationalization can never be reduced to the acquisition of a set of skills if we agree that the precondition for good communication practices in a global world is a cultural (and linguistic) sensitivity that learners can gradually develop when they are regularly exposed to difference. English composition teachers in the U.S. and English language teachers across the world should lead efforts to internationalize programs, curricula, and courses in all disciplines by promoting a wide range of pedagogical strategies and initiatives that may culminate into, but are not limited to, virtual exchange.

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