Innovation in Language Learning
16 edition

Virtual Exchange and Meaning-making Translanguaging and Pushing the Boundaries

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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE – What and Why

What is virtual exchange?
- **online intercultural interaction and collaboration**
- partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations
- under the guidance of educators (O'Dowd, 2018; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016)

Why virtual exchange?
- economic and environmental cost of study abroad programmes
- challenges to physical mobility posed by the pandemic (White & Lee, 2020)
- **a sustainable and low-cost model of international learning** (de Wit, 2016)
- students are now more than ever accustomed to working online

Key assumptions
to design the transnational telecollaborative project

The Virtual: virtual spaces as places of learning

Task-based learning

Blended Learning

Knowledge-building approach

Intercultural competence

A space for learning

- *where students spend time, interact, and do things, for example collaborating with each other on a shared project in a shared space, and which supports community-building and the sharing of resources* (Burbules, 2006)

- Active student learning

- Technology = new spaces of educational interactions

- Blend traditional face-to-face courses

Building knowledge

- Task macro-sequencing: **information exchange; comparison and analysis; collaboration and product creation** (O'Dowd & Ware 2009: 175-178).

- The opportunity to explore different cultural perspectives through collaborative tasks based on cultural and socio-political themes.

- Blended learning and flipping the classroom: learners bring their own perspective and culture

Intercultural language learning

- **create ideas,** which can have a "public life", a social utility beyond the classroom

- foster the **intercultural analysis of the practices and values** of the cultures of the groups involved in the virtual exchange, **Intercultural Competence** (Byram, 1997) and **Intercultural Citizenship** (Byram 2008, 2011)

INTERCULTURAL OR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education (O'Dowd, 2018)

- **rich intercultural interaction**
- establishing **partnerships**
- **themes** which are **of social and political relevance**
- **work** with their international partners to **undertake action and change**
- **guided reflection in the classroom**
- part of course work
- **awareness of how intercultural communication is mediated by online technologies** and how social media can shape the creation and interpretation of messages

A TRANSLANGUAGING APPROACH

A translanguaging approach to communication

Students are free to deploy the full range of their linguistic repertoires to communicate rather than being artificially restricted to parallel monolingualism, i.e. only speaking Italian and then only speaking English

This mixing allows students to "liberate the meaning-making potential" that their use of language can provide

The Pavia Melbourne Projects

Stated aims for students

- **Speaking, listening and interactional skills**
- **An opportunity to use** the target language in a safe, supported environment
- **Intercultural competence,**
- **Building relationships** and **working** with students from other cultural backgrounds
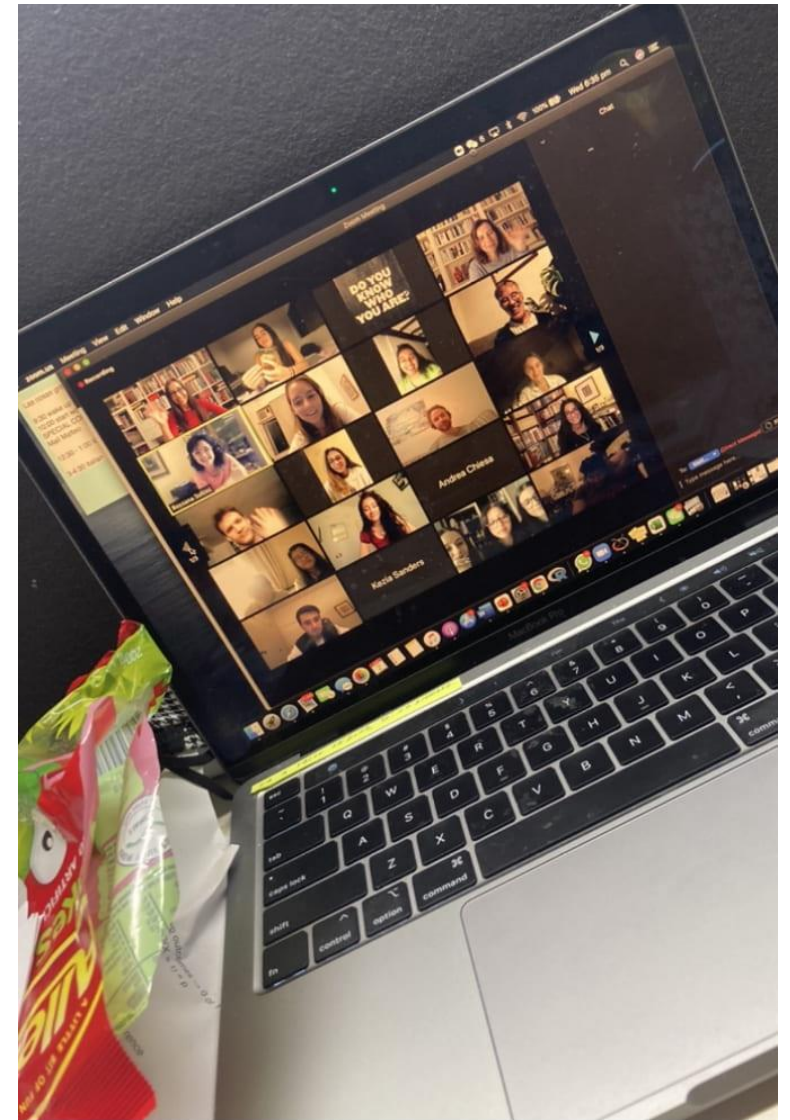
The Pavia Melbourne Project 2023

The Pavia Melbourne Virtual Exchange Project

Italian Studies, University of Melbourne, Australia
Liceo Linguistico Adelaide Cairoli, Pavia, Italia

April-May 2023

- students learning Italian at the University of Melbourne, Australia
- senior secondary students learning a range of languages at the Liceo Adelaide Cairoli in Pavia, Italy.

A familiar formula:

- Both sets of students receive details of the virtual exchange

- Students are paired by staff with a peer or occasionally two depending on respective class numbers

Our formula

1. Introductory video on flip.com – mix of languages

2. Weekly video meetings

3. A set of topics set by staff – a joint project

- Language exchange – use both languages | 40 minutes recommended
- Intercultural exchange – compare and think critically about each other's culture

The Pavia Melbourne Project 2023 – something different

Students had **complete liberty and control** over the content of their weekly meetings.

Freed from the "strictures of external categories" (Claire Kramsch) `→ more spontaneous and fruitful exchange.

"Forced speech is not only uncomfortable, it makes no direct contribution to language acquisition" (Stephen Krashen)

The Pavia Melbourne Project 2023 – what we found

Topics canvassed by students

Animals	Food and eating	Slang
Books	Growing up	Sport
Cities (= their own cities)	Hobbies/Interests	Stress*
Climate change	Holidays	Student wellbeing*
Cultural stereotypes	Italian culture	Study
Cultural traditions and festivities	Introductions	Traditional games*
Day-to-day life	Knowledge of the other's country	Travel
Differences between Italy and Australia	Language learning	TV programs
Education systems	Driving licences	Ukraine-Russian war*
Environment and sustainability	Multiculturalism*	Weather
Eurovision	Music	Work
Family	Natural disasters*	
Floods in Emilia-Romagna	Patriotism/National pride*	
Films	Politics/Political issues	

*(Student themes - *denotes only found in one student entry)*

- **A desire to connect with each other through familiar and known experiences**
- An attempt to test the knowledge held about the other country and culture
- A constant compare and contrast approach
- Not dissimilar to the types of indications we normally provide
- Students have a firm task orientation in mind when approaching the virtual exchange

Key messages: virtual exchange

New friendships
- Real connections with their partner
- For some a pleasant surprise
- Future intentions to meet in person, typically in Italy

Not so different after all
- **A surprising realisation of shared similarities**, whether in views or different aspects of daily life

Connecting across media
- A gateway for a complex set of connections across social media: Instagram profiles, sharing TikTok videos, shared online music playlist → **multifaceted nature of identity both on and offline**
- Virtuale exchange bridges temporal-physical divide to integrate the online persona.
- For some students, using one language while communicating in writing, another in online face-to-face contexts

Understanding language and communication
- **An experience of real, authentic and spontaneous communication**
- **A translanguaging approach** to resolve moments of incomprehension: "it's more important to try to talk rather than be perfect".

Key messages: freedom

Real communication means real learning

- Self-directed or unpredictable topics = strengthened learning vis-à-vis normal classroom learning → virtual exchanges among peers provides more fertile learning experiences for students
- World view of someone of a similar age but in a different part of the world

Opportunities to control the situation

- Majority enjoyed freedom, some students initially floundered
- This led to strategies to organise the situation = important transferable skills

Future directions

Concluding remarks

- Less structured and more open-ended = more meaningfully on a human level AND more significant learning experiences both linguistically and interculturally

- Students from both hemispheres: **new friendships which they hoped would endure**

- Not just another "homework task" but is something more
- Not only their language and culture skills but also their **ability to communicate**

- Translanguaging: key to providing **an underpinning confidence** - *pushes the boundaries of classic language teaching contexts and clearly provides students with access to deeper and more satisfying interactions*

Thank you | Grazie

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