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Chapter 9. Afterword: Looking back and looking forward: What is the future of telecollaboration?

Introduction

The basic premise of telecollaboration is defined by the word itself: *Tele*, meaning distant, and *collaboration*; working together at a distance. Many of the definitions of this term also put *culture* in the center of such collaboration. However, as shown in this volume, and discussed in the first chapter by Dooly and O’Dowd, the wide diversity of what telecollaboration may include makes it surprisingly difficult to define it in a ‘one meaning only’ way. While this author is not *quite* old enough to have been involved in the earliest days of telecollaboration described by Kern (cited in Chapter 1 of this volume) in the form of the pen pal exchanges starting in the 1920s (Kern, 2013), I most certainly remember engaging in two sets of pen pal exchanges while taking Spanish in Junior High and High School from 1980 to 1984 in Spokane, Washington.

In that time period there were relatively few native speakers of Spanish in that city, and the big cultural event for the Spanish courses was our annual field trip to *El Sombrero* restaurant to experience Mexican food and attempt our orders with the owner of the restaurant using the polite form *Quisiera* (I would like) rather than *Quiero* (I want). The pen pal exchanges we engaged in with students in Mexico were slow due to need to rely on the US and Mexican postal systems. Though we did not yet have the term “snail mail,” the wait of weeks between letters from our partners was, to say the least, frustrating. Nonetheless, the exchanges my classmates and I engaged in opened my eyes to new uses of the language beyond that of the textbook and gave me glimpses of a magnificent Mexican culture that Spokane, Washington was simply unable to provide at that time. Looking back, it is clear to me now that those were my first steps into the

professorial career I now enjoy and the research field, telecollaboration, that continues to provide me with rich opportunities for learning across the world.

Those early days of *traditional mail* telecollaborative exchange were revolutionized with the creation of computer networks; one of the best initial examples of this being the PLATO system, which gave users on the platform access to early forms of email, message boards (PLATO notes), and chat (Talkomatic) in the beginning of the 1970s (Dear, 2017). The explosion of research into the application of the modernized versions of these tools developed by PLATO, as applied to language learning and teaching, took off in the late 1990s and continues today. The new exchanges replaced snail mail with email (e.g., Fedderholdt, 2001; Gonglewski, Meloni, & Brant, 2001; González-Bueno, 1998; Greenfield, 2003), or Message Boards/Electronic Bulletin Boards (e.g., Benton, 1996; Chen, 2006; Savignon & Roithmeier, 2004), or MOOs (e.g., Shield, 2003; Schwienhorst, 2004) or with live chat (e.g., Chen, 1999; Chun, 2003; Ramzan & Saito, 1998). All of these technological innovations and research studies have led us to the telecollaboration projects presented in this volume.

Review of the Volume

As noted in the studies discussed immediately above, and as described in the chapters in this volume, all research and collaboration includes both highs and lows. All of these projects began with firm foundations based on previous literature and were well-designed, leading to largely positive results for the students and researchers. The *high points* in these studies provide both classroom teachers and future researchers with excellent models to follow in their own work, but the *lows* in these projects are perhaps even more important in that they can also teach us important lessons (and things to avoid) for the future.

To summarize the studies from this volume, in Chapter Two, Anaïs García-Martínez and Maria Gracia-Téllez presented their telecollaboration-supported science project that engaged third grade students from an economically disadvantaged area of Barcelona with a group of fourth grade students in a city just outside of Barcelona that is strongly focused on the use of technology in learning.

In Chapter Three, Morcilo Salas discussed her project linking a group of refugees at a school in Thailand with a school in Spain. As noted, the refugee group was diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, and the region of Myanmar from which they came, while the school in Spain located near Barcelona was more traditional in nature. The goal, as noted by the authors, was to “train these young adults during one year in the necessary skills to apply to a higher education institution, either international universities or local migrant schools with social insertion projects” (Salas, this volume).

Maria Mont and Dolors Masats provide *Tips and Suggestions to Implementation Telecollaborative Projects with Young Learners* in Chapter Four based on their extensive experience in this area. By closely examining two linked projects, the first *Travelling through the Arts* and the second focused on *Healthy Habits* the authors are able to provide a number of concrete suggestions for those considering telecollaborative projects in the future.

In Chapter Five Alexandra Bonet Pueyo connects students from her school in Terrassa, Spain to students in a class in Sweden. After extensive discussion, their telecollaboration focused on the critical issue of the Syrian refugee crisis. In addition to students examining the background of this problem, they also worked together to create a *manifest* on this issue.

Granada Bejarano Sánchez and Gerard Giménez Manrique bring the perspective of telecollaborative *newbies* to the volume as they describe their project connecting two schools in the Catalunya region of Spain in Chapter Six. One of the participating institutions was a private international school and the second a public school. Their project was developed while taking a course focused on developing telecollaborative projects jointly taught by a university in Barcelona and Urbana-Champaign in the U.S. (see Sadler & Dooly, 2016).

Jennie Ingelsson and Anna Linder fill Chapter Seven with a description of their telecollaborative project between students in Sweden and New Zealand. In their email exchanges they focused on the concept of *culture* in order to discover how the cultures represented by these two countries were similar and/or different.

The last research study in this volume (Chapter Eight) consists of a telecollaborative project created by Sara Brunn undertaken between students in Tanzania and her school in Sweden in which they explored the issue of sustainability in their English and Social Science courses. In this case, the topic of focus developed organically based on the early discussions their students engaged in.

Lessons Learned

As noted above, telecollaborative projects are, in my experience, *always* a learning process for both the students involved in them and for their teachers as well. They are also filled with sometimes painful lessons for the researcher. The seven studies that comprise this volume are all wonderful examples of the benefits of telecollaboration and their victories and challenges present lessons for those interested in their own projects. While all of these chapters discuss these lessons, and particularly the *Tips and Suggestions* contribution by Mont and Masats, the key takeaways discussed below are essential in all such projects. Ignore them at your own peril!

Be ready for the workload and (hopefully) like your partner

As mentioned numerous times in the previous chapters, it is almost certain that you will spend more time in the planning and implementation of a project than initially estimated. Working with someone you like will make this process much smoother, and should your friendship survive the telecollaboration, you'll confirm that this is a friend indeed. While we often discuss the need for students to get to know each other prior to digging into the *meat* of a telecollaborative project, it is equally (and perhaps even more) important that the teachers involved spend time getting acquainted since they will be working together for *many* hours. It is always easier to be flexible and understanding with a friend in comparison to a stranger.

Sánchez and Giménez Manrique (this volume) summarize this issue of the importance of a partner when they say that “coordination with the partner is really fundamental.” Ideally, as noted by Salas in Chapter Three, communication between partners should take place synchronously rather than via email. Based on my own telecollaboration over the past 15 years (see Sadler & Dooly, 2016), I very much agree with both of these recommendations. Assume that for each hour of time spent in the classroom on such a project that you will have to spend many more in the planning and implementation processes.

Additional explanation on this issue is provided by Bonet Pueyo (this volume): “Usually teachers work in isolation and are solely responsible for the development of the syllabus, the design of the activities and the

preparation of materials. Sharing materials and goals with people outside my school was new for me and the sense of accountability that accompanied this teamwork was intimidating.” While we often focus on the role of the students in telecollaboration, the role of the teacher, and especially in the planning and implementation processes is absolutely critical.

None of this should scare teachers off from engaging in this very rewarding activity. Instead, it means that those interested should begin their planning long ahead of the projected implementation. It is also very important to note that the second time is always easier!

Don't neglect the needs (analysis)

Sometimes telecollaborative projects occur because a researcher designed a project and then seeks out participating teachers to implement it. Don't do this, *unless* the researcher agrees to work in close collaboration with the teachers and students. The best telecollaboration is designed in partnership with the instructors that it will involve. If it is not possible to design the collaboration with the participating teachers from the very beginning, a very good compromise, as discussed by Ingelsson and Linder in Chapter Seven is to “...[have] a conversation with the teacher first to adjust and modify [your] planning to be suited to the different settings in each classroom.” It is important to never forget that telecollaboration requires a great deal of effort for both the teachers and students involved, so it should be designed with *their* needs in mind.

The use of a needs analysis, even if informal, will not only help to set “solid, meaningful, attainable and realistic goals and contents” (Sánchez and Giménez Manrique, Chapter 6, this volume), but may also lead, as revealed in Bruun's project, a focus of interest to all the students involved—a focus on the environment for those students.

Expect the unexpected

In an interview for the New York Times, the World War II General and President of the United States Dwight D. Eisenhower said this about war: “Plans are useless, but planning is everything” (Blair, 1957). Though the stakes are admittedly much lower, the same may be said for telecollaboration.

Planning a telecollaborative project is, as discussed above, both challenging and time consuming and once the project begins it is likely that things will not go as expected.

Sometimes the surprise may be that the class a teacher is engaging with is not quite what they expected. Ingelsson and Linder discuss this in Chapter Seven of this book when the class that they expected would have 25 students instead had 90. Other times (see Bonet Pueyo, Chapter Five) it may be the case that despite careful planning it is simply impossible to accomplish all the intended activities. As she notes, “this can be frustrating and teachers may conclude that the project did not reach a proper closure if things are not completed as they were stipulated at the beginning.”

The healthiest attitude is to assume that things will not always go as planned. Anyone who has spent time in a classroom will understand that this is often the case. The key to successful telecollaboration in this area is to remain flexible and, whenever possible, to have a back-up plan. If your telecollaboration partner is willing to work with you (see the points above), plans can always be changed and sometimes adaptations are essential for success.

Beware the zones and calendars

While I am a Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2.5 hours South of Chicago), my primary telecollaboration partner, Dr. Melinda Dooly, is a Professor at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in Spain. This means that our students normally have a seven-hour time difference when working together. In some cases (see Ingelsson and Linder, this volume) the time difference may be even greater (12 hours between Sweden and New Zealand). Cases of *extreme* time zones may preclude the possibility of class-to-class synchronous communication, but it does not necessarily negate the potential for this entirely. In the case of our Champaign-Barcelona telecollaboration we have our students, who are at the university level, post their schedules on a Doodle poll so that we can determine when groups of students might meet outside of our regular class time. This usually means that they meet with their partners earlier in the morning in the US or later at night in Spain. However, it is also vital to note that synchronous is not necessarily best. With lower-level student, asynchronous communication in the form of email, message board,

or social network interaction is often better because it gives the students time to think, compose their message, and fully understand the replies from their partners.

As noted by Brunn in Chapter Eight, “incompatible school calendars” can also be a challenge for telecollaboration. In our Champaign-Barcelona collaboration, which takes place each Spring semester, we have to consider the difference in the starts of term (Illinois 1–2 weeks earlier), the end dates (the US again 1–2 weeks earlier), vacations (Spring Break for Illinois, and a seemingly endless number of religious holidays in Spain), and required activities (a one-week student teaching experience Barcelona). This changes the possibility for 15-weeks of collaboration to something like 9–10. Such differences, once they are taken into account, are simply another part of the experience and such gaps may even be seen as valuable time when an instructor can work with his or her students for a week with a short break from the telecollaboration.

Pedagogy is key, technology is secondary—but choose your tools carefully!

Technology is both a key component of telecollaboration and one of the biggest potential pitfalls in the process. Make no assumptions regarding:

- Student access to technology
- School access to technology
- Student familiarity with tools that you may already be using on your own
- Student interest in tools that you yourself use.
- Internet access

Part of any needs analysis, as discussed above, should relate to issues of technology access and familiarity since issues/disasters in this area can be very detrimental to the process.

Salas (this volume) mentions that while Facebook was popular amongst student in Myanmar, use of such tools in the classroom environment was “minimal or non-existent.” In that setting students were also unfamiliar with keyboard use as their main *computing* was via their cell phones. In contrast, based on my own experience, students in the U.S. may now consider Facebook to be something only used by their parents, and therefore extremely *uncool*.

In some settings (e.g., Bruun's project in this volume), internet connects may be either slow or sporadic, and computer access may also be limited. It is also the case that while some groups (again, see Bruun) may make successful use of a variety of tools during the telecollaboration (11 in that project), in other situations it may be the case that "when introducing new platforms, the students [may be] absolutely overwhelmed, and [need] more time than expected in order to familiarize themselves with the tools" (Salas, Chapter 3, this volume). The key is to not let an overabundance of tools distract from the goals and pedagogical grounding of the process. An adequate needs analysis and extensive discussion with the telecollaboration partner will ensure the right fit in this regard. Importantly, as noted by Ingelsson and Linden in Chapter Seven, don't forget that the teacher must also be familiar with the tools that will be used. They, after all, are the ones who will need to explain them to the students.

Conclusion

While this chapter has made it clear that engaging in telecollaboration requires a great deal of planning and work on the part of the participating teachers, I hope that the potential benefits are also clear. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, telecollaboration has the potential to offer rich experiences for both the students and teachers involved and can, quite literally, open the world to them. It is an unfortunate and sad fact that the world we live in today is one that is full of conflicts based on regions, religions, access to resources, and many other factors. As educators, one of our goals should be to encourage our students to attain a better sense of 'the other', and telecollaborative exchanges are one of our best tools to do so. By connecting with individuals from across the world and getting to know them and their cultures they may shift from 'others' to friends. Consider the difference that might make for our future.

The projects described in the volume are all excellent examples to inspire teachers to get started on this process. It is my hope that they will inspire you to begin the journey as well.

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