Abstracts

“Virtual Exchange: Attending to diversity in online collaborative contexts”

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Virtual Exchange is an umbrella term which refers to the numerous online learning initiatives and methodologies which engage learners in sustained online collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programmes and under the guidance of educators. Although Virtual Exchange has been employed in university foreign language education for over 25 years, for most of that time it has very much been a peripheral activity, carried out and promoted by a small but convinced group of practitioners.

However, current debates on the economic and environmental cost of study abroad programmes, as well as the challenges to physical mobility posed by global pandemics have made Virtual Exchange an increasingly attractive option for institutions of higher education as they search for sustainable models of international learning which will serve as an alternative or complement to physical mobility programmes.

But what do we know about the impact of Virtual Exchange in foreign language education? And how can VE be designed to attend to the needs and abilities of diverse learner groups in our classrooms?

The past three years have also seen the publication of a plethora of impact reports and studies which present the findings or projects and organisations such as Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, the Stevens Initiative and the EVALUATE and EVOLVE projects who are engaged in promoting large-scale Virtual Exchange initiatives. For the most part, these publications present both qualitative and quantitative data on what students learn from Virtual Exchange and what teachers and institutions can do to support this learning.

In this presentation I will use these publications as well as other key publications from the VE literature to explore how VE can provide appropriate learning opportunities for heterogeneous learner groups and how it can incorporate the particular abilities and needs of learners.

A list of resources on Virtual Exchange curated by the author can be found here:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fbQ1xpPM_HHbiOlulk_m1SN0MkgrRyZpVM4iTxBrM0/edit?usp=sharing