

9 Our maiden voyage: implementing virtual exchange as a collaborative professional development

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Abstract

Undertaking a Virtual Exchange (VE) project for the first time is supported by introductory online training and mentoring offered through the European Commission's Erasmus+ programme, and can be a source of teacher Professional Development (PD). This study based on Exploratory Practice (EP) describes aspects of the planning and implementation of an initial VE by partners from technical universities in Łódź, Poland and Berlin, Germany, who completed the online EVOLVE training in October 2018. The current study offers a basic framework of four distinct phases of the VE as a collaborative PD project. This novel framework can support teachers engaging in their first exchange as well as contribute to an understanding of VE adoption and implementation for mentors, trainers, and researchers.

Keywords: virtual exchange, teacher professional development, critically reflective teaching, exploratory practice.

1. Introduction

This VE maiden voyage began at an educational technology conference in September 2018, where the partners met and agreed to participate in the online

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EVOLVE (2019) training in order to implement a VE together. Both are lecturers in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at technical universities in Łódź, Poland and Berlin, Germany, teaching courses for students of engineering and natural sciences at the same proficiency level. By focusing on the PD aspects of this shared experience, it is hoped that insights into how and what was learnt through implementing a first VE might be useful to other teachers, as well as VE mentors and trainers.

Just as the courses we were teaching were similar and therefore lent themselves to such an exchange, we also began our collaboration from a shared teaching philosophy and a technology-adopting mindset. Research indicates that technology-adopting teachers have a more learner-centred, constructivist approach (Tondeur, Van Braak, Ertmer, & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2017; Trautwein, 2018), which was borne out in our collaboration. In addition, the EVOLVE training itself, which takes place entirely online and with a far-flung virtual cohort and instructors, can be understood as a self-select filter for educational technology adoption; only teachers open to integrating technology into their practice would take on such a training.

In developing and implementing a VE, teacher collaboration is a prerequisite to the learner collaboration that is at the heart of the VE. Son (2018) describes teacher collaboration in the context of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as “the process of working together while sharing experiences, ideas, information and resources” (p. 61), which describes the experience of our first VE. An important aspect of an initial VE is mentoring by an experienced practitioner after the training has been completed, which played a role in the early stages of our exchange.

2. A critically reflective teaching approach

There are any number of PD frameworks that might be useful in describing teacher collaboration in the VE. Brookfield (2017) describes the four lenses of the critically reflective teacher as students’ eyes, personal experiences, theories,

and colleagues' perceptions. I have chosen the latter here. Brookfield (2017) is concerned with questioning habits and assumptions in order to shape our teaching and make it transformational for learners. One means of gathering our colleagues' perceptions is through peer observations and discussions where teachers come together to interrogate their practice. I propose that VE collaboration can be understood as a radically immersive and sustained form of peer observation in that it involves immersion not only in a colleague's teaching practice, but in a particular course with particular students and tasks, all within a specific project with its own learning goals over an extended period of time. This is a powerful lens when it is accompanied by an on-going critical conversation between committed colleagues.

What differentiates critical conversation from day-to-day talk with colleagues is that it is both sustained and intentional, conditions offered by a VE. From the teacher perspective, VE is potentially one long critical conversation that "helps us to notice aspects of our practice that are usually hidden from us" (Brookfield, 2017, p. 8). During our first semester long VE experience, this critical conversation was enabled by a total of 18 regular weekly meetings, including before and after the teaching phase. In these conversations, we discussed logistical and organisational aspects of the VE, we talked about what our students were doing (or not), and how to better engage them. We asked questions about what did not seem to be working as expected, and we rejoiced in the shared successes. The second column of Table 1 summarises the main content of our critical conversation throughout the phases of the VE.

3. A framework for teacher collaboration in VE

Beginning with the four-week online EVOLVE training and throughout the VE experience, an EP approach (Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2017) was taken, involving an on-going cycle of observation, note-taking, and critical reflection (both collaboratively with my VE partner and individually), followed by actions and plans for future action. The EP approach to PD is appropriate as it offers a form of classroom-based inquiry for language teachers informed by action

research methods and centred on teachers becoming learners about their own practice.

Table 1. A framework for teacher collaboration in VE

Phases of the VE collaboration	Critical conversation content	Teacher communication
Phase 1: Synchronisation	Calendar, schedule, learner characteristics, class profiles Group formation? Topics? Tasks?	5 Skype meetings (4 with mentor)
Phase 2: Decision-making	Learning objectives, tasks, materials, online tools, implementation issues	5 Skype meetings (1 with mentor)
Phase 3: VE	What is happening? What are students doing? Articulation of philosophy and approach	5 Skype meetings + 6 VE synchronous sessions with learners during class times
Phase 4: Reflection and Integration	Preparing collaborative presentations, incorporating learner feedback, ideas for the next semester	3 Skype meetings and counting ...

Table 1 offers a structure for teacher collaboration in a VE based on the content of the 14-week semester of this initial VE experience, seven weeks of which comprised the VE itself, and the weeks leading up to and following the teaching semester. There were four distinct phases of the VE. The first phase, synchronisation, was the most mentor-intensive and included creating a shared calendar in Google Docs so that we could schedule the VE and see where it would fit into our respective courses. In Phase 2, decision-making, discussion of our teaching practice became more salient as we delved more deeply into designing tasks, setting learning objectives, and choosing appropriate online tools. Phase 3 was the seven week VE in which we also offered students support during 45-minute synchronous sessions during our class times. During this phase, we articulated our approach to not only the VE, but to our teaching practice more generally, and as we entered Phase 4, reflection and integration, we began to draw lessons and insights for the following semester.

At the end of this maiden VE voyage, we found that for each of us our teaching practice had been impacted, and not simply by the many small changes and moments of insight during the experience. The most global change was that even coming from a shared pedagogical philosophy, the critical conversation enabled us to perceive and discuss our differences; my approach being more focused on providing structure and my partner's more on learner self-sufficiency. We were able to articulate how we had each moved closer to the other's approach, transforming our practice through the collaborative PD experience of the VE.

4. Thoughts about this study and conclusion

This study suggests two basic considerations that teachers undertaking a VE either for the first time or who are continuing to develop their VE might find useful. First, the time commitment is considerable and sustained even outside the parameters of the exchange itself, and may be most productively met if a regular meeting time is set up in advance. The second consideration demonstrated by this study and reinforced by the EP approach is that the VE offers a valuable source of on-going and collaborative PD that can enrich the participants' teaching practice. Based on these conclusions, further research on what impact incorporating VE into one's teaching practice might have on the pedagogical approach, philosophy, and other specific practices would be useful. Such research could make a contribution to the literature of VE and educational technology, as well as teacher PD more generally. Finally, additional qualitative research into the lived experience of teachers engaging in VE could add to an understanding on how VE gets implemented, as well as possible directions for the development of PD to support teachers in educational technology adoption.

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