

10 Telecollaboration in the foundation year classroom: the ‘Global Student Collective’

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Abstract

The ‘Global Student Collective’ is a telecollaboration project on the International Foundation Year (IFY) programme at the University of Southampton. IFY students were connected with volunteers in Brazil, India, Hungary, and Italy online in order to find out more about their countries. The project required the students to exercise multiple transferable skills, including teamwork, time management, and intercultural awareness. They also developed vital oral, written, and digital skills. The researcher used an Exploratory Practice (EP) approach utilising existing pedagogical activities for data collection. This paper identifies the challenges the project presented and presents preliminary findings from the research data in order to assist practitioners interested in telecollaboration to design their own projects.

Keywords: telecollaboration, global citizenship, intercultural competence, foundation year.

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1. Introduction

This paper focusses on the ‘Global Student Collective’, a telecollaboration project which was introduced in October 2018 on the IFY programme at the University of Southampton, UK. The 17 IFY students were mixed-nationality, non-native speakers between 17-19 years old. Telecollaboration is a method of connecting people in different locations using digital technology to work collectively on a project (O’Dowd, 2018). The six week project was piloted on a compulsory module called ‘Global Society’. This module introduces students to key concepts of global governance and economic structures and encourages them to explore contemporary issues, such as global warming, global inequality, migration, and human rights.

Increasingly, students need to develop the skills and knowledge to enter a globalised academic environment. This includes broadening their understanding of the world around them, their place within it, and helping them develop the communication and digital skills necessary to participate fully. A recent UKCISA (2018) report highlighted a gap in curriculum development with regard to global citizenship. The survey defined global citizenship as “being able to interact more freely and meaningfully with people of different nationalities and backgrounds” (UKCISA, 2018, p. 50). Global Society encourages students to view themselves as “‘global citizen[s]’ who [are] preparing to study at an outward-looking university with an international focus” (Edwards & Watson, 2017, n.p.). Building on previous work on global citizenship in education, the ‘Global Student Collective’ project was devised to connect IFY students with people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives, not just the ‘mobile elite’, which (arguably) they represent (Aktas, Pitts, Richards, & Silova, 2017; Andreotti, 2006; Rizvi, 2007; Shultz, 2007).

The ‘Global Student Collective’ connected the IFY students via a closed Facebook group with volunteer students from Brazil (postgraduates aged 21-24 studying biomedical sciences), India (postgraduates aged 21-23 studying political science), Hungary (undergraduate English majors, aged 19), and Italy (high school students, aged 16-18, from the same English class). The

IFY students gathered their opinions on their country's role and position in the world today and tried to discover more about the current economic, social, and political challenges facing those countries. The students collated the information and delivered a ten minute assessed group presentation on their findings, followed by a Q&A.

The final presentations were rich and nuanced and the student feedback was positive overall. Nevertheless, the cultural, educational, and age differences between the students presented some challenges. This paper will present the IFY students' reflections on the project and make suggestions for practitioners implementing telecollaboration projects themselves.

2. Method

IFY students managed their interactions with their telecollaboration partners, and IFY tutor correspondence with the students abroad was limited. First, the IFY students made introductory videos and posted them on the Facebook group. The students from Brazil, India, Italy, and Hungary responded and the groups connected. They then decided how to communicate further.

The students were asked to shift their discussion focus over three themes: 'my country and me' (personal reflections on what their nationality means to them); 'my country in the world' (fact-based analysis of the economy and challenges facing their country); and 'me in the world' (their understanding of 'global citizenship'). This encouraged the students to move from general commentary about nationality and culture to more complex and controversial topics.

EP research techniques were used (Allwright, 2003). This involved utilising "normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools" (Allwright, 2003, p. 127), including a teacher diary, regular student feedback, and whole class discussions. The presentations and the Q&A also offered further insights. A questionnaire was also sent to all IFY students. Twelve out of 17 responded. Some of the main points from this combined research data are outlined below.

3. Results and discussion

The nature and volume of communication between the groups differed. Seven of the questionnaire respondents reported they were in contact more than once a week, and nine agreed their students responded to their questions. However, four students reported they found it difficult to express themselves, possibly because of a lack of confidence or language ability. After initial introductions, most students continued corresponding through WhatsApp and Messenger. Two IFY students suggested using ‘video’ or ‘facetime’ would have helped communication, but none did so.

There were 27 Italian high school students and their form tutor guided the project. The IFY students adapted their approach accordingly and sent their questions in advance, which the Italians responded to in small groups. This resulted in fewer, more formal interactions focussed mainly on the objectives of the project.

Privacy concerns were raised and a letter was written in Italian to parents explaining the aims of the project and reassuring them that their children’s information would not be shared. This supports [O’Dowd’s \(2015\)](#) recommendation that the expectations of the groups of volunteers and their attitudes to social media as a teaching and learning tool should be considered. Furthermore, the IFY students noted that the Italian students might be ‘a bit too young’ to consider politics. Some preparation on the cultural contexts of the students would have been useful, helping the IFY students to develop their ‘intercultural awareness’ before the task.

In contrast, communication with the four Brazilians was lively and relaxed. The IFY students reported that they were in contact ‘all the time, at least once a day’. When asked what they discussed, one student said “Anything! Movies, gaming, fashion, so many things. They are very friendly”. The Brazilians were 21-23 years old and confident communicators. They did not study together so communication tended to be one-to-one. When asked how this was established, the IFY cohort explained that they chose each other ‘naturally’ as relationships developed. With politics, the Brazilians were concerned about ‘upsetting’ the

others in the group and preferred to respond individually, acknowledging the sensitivity of the topic. Again, this highlights the importance of pre-work on intercultural awareness (Dooly, 2008).

The four Indians were political science Master's students and saw the project as an opportunity to educate the IFY students about India. When asked about the nature of their interactions, the IFY reported that they got a lot of facts but no 'feelings'. They said, "we tried to figure out their opinions from the language they were using". They learned from this saying, "next time we will aim to get their own opinions rather than pure information".

The four Hungarian students were less forthcoming and needed to be prompted by the IFY group. They seemed reluctant to talk about political issues. One Hungarian student was willing to, but not on a 'public' forum. At the time, Hungary was experiencing political upheaval (BBC, 2018) and tutors had discussed possible problems via email prior to the project. It was felt that participants may need "to acknowledge the limits [of] their interview questions in order to take local issues into account", further highlighting the importance of cultural awareness during telecollaboration.

Overall, the students enjoyed the project, citing the "amazing opportunity" to "do something different". One group said, "we learned about a new culture and a different lifestyle", and another said, "it is absolutely more interesting to talk to them than researching by yourself".

4. Conclusions

The IFY students practised time management, teamwork, and digital communication skills during this telecollaboration project. Based on this project, key recommendations for fellow practitioners are: (1) ensure that sufficient time is devoted to the project and that expectations are clear, (2) enable face-to-face communication through videoconferencing, and (3) embed intercultural competence in the learning process.

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