

Project:

The INTENT Project: Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education

<http://intent-project.eu/>

Robert O'Dowd
University of León (Spain)

robert.odowd@unileon.es

1. Introduction: Background to the INTENT project

Most of the readers of *The EUROCALL Review* will probably be familiar with the concept of telecollaboration or Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) as it has been one of focuses of research and discussion over the past decade. Very simply, telecollaborative projects engage groups of foreign language learners in virtual intercultural interaction and exchange with partner classes in geographically distant locations. These exchanges most often involve bilateral projects between classes in two different countries, each learning the other's language. However, they can also involve more complex, multilateral projects involving language learners from many different countries working together online using a lingua franca such as English as a means of communication.

Since the 1990's, foreign language (FL) educators at European universities have used telecollaboration to bring learners into contact with groups of target language speakers with the aim creating opportunities for authentic communication, meaningful collaboration and interpersonal relationship development. Research has shown that this activity, telecollaboration, contributes to learner autonomy, linguistic accuracy (Kinginger & Belz, 2002), intercultural awareness (Ware, 2004), intercultural skills (Belz & Mueller-Hartmann, 2003; Thorne, 2010), and electronic literacies (Hauck, 2010).

However, whilst primary and secondary school teachers interested in running OIE projects have been supported by major networks and virtual platforms such as ePals (www.epals.com) and the European Union's Etwinning platform (www.etwinning.net), telecollaboration has received little support in university contexts to date and its impact has been relatively limited.

Various reasons have been identified for this. First, telecollaboration remains relatively unknown outside of specialised research communities such as Eurocall. Second, practitioners who do organise exchanges encounter many barriers, such as difficulty in finding partners, misalignment of academic calendars, differing assessment procedures and divergent attitudes to ICT. An initial small-scale study carried out by this author (O'Dowd, 2011) found that university institutions often view telecollaboration as an 'add-on' activity which relies on 'pioneering' teachers and motivated students and as such, telecollaboration is not considered an integral part of university study programmes.

Some further reasons identified in this study included a lack of pedagogical training available for educators, educators' fear of extra work-load due to lack of support and resources, the Lack of long-term stability in partnerships with other universities and difficulties establishing academic credit to students for telecollaborative activity.

Taking into account this current state of affairs in this area, the INTENT* project was awarded funding by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning programme to carry out a 30 month project. The team emerged mainly from collaboration between members of the Eurocall CMC SIG and many of the team members will be familiar to participants in Eurocall conferences – <http://www.scoop.it/t/intent-project-news>

The team established two key aims for their project:

1. To raise greater awareness among students, educators and decision makers of telecollaboration as a tool for virtual mobility in Foreign Language education at university level.
2. To achieve more effective integration of telecollaboration in university institutions.

These aims reflect the main issues confronting this area of virtual mobility – first, the lack of awareness among educators about this activity and how it can be organised and second, the need to provide practitioners with the tools, training and support necessary to make the activity as effective as possible.

By achieving these aims, the project team hopes to increase the number of students, educators and decision makers who are aware of the benefits of telecollaboration and who will consider integrating it into their educational activities. The next part of this paper focuses on the European survey and collection of case studies which the team carried out in order to establish a clear overview of the levels of use of telecollaboration across European universities, and to identify practical barriers to the take-up of telecollaboration.



Figure 1. The INTENT team at their kick-off meeting at the University of León, Spain.

2. Designing a survey of Telecollaboration in European universities

In order to carry out a representative survey of telecollaborative practice around European universities, the project team undertook various steps. In October 2011, the project team drew up a list of telecollaborative practitioners around Europe based on their own extensive networks of contacts. This list was collected in a database in the project wiki where each group member listed the name and contact email of their contacts. Following that, further potential informants were identified through academic publications, conference presentations and relevant mailing lists. Third, a call for participants was also published on the project website and in various academic mailing lists and relevant social networks asking for those European university colleagues who

had organised telecollaboration in the past or who were interested in this type of activity to carry out the surveys. Colleagues were also asked to share the call widely with other professionals. Individuals who answered these announcements and expressed their willingness to participate in the survey were added to the database of informants in the project's wiki. This database was also to serve as a useful source of dissemination of future activities and publications by the project team.

The survey itself was developed through a process of pre-piloting and piloting similar to that described by Nunan and Bailey (2009: 145). Initial drafts of three different surveys were drawn up by the project members in León and Padua. The three surveys were aimed at: 1) university educators in European institutions who had carried out telecollaboration, 2) university educators in European institutions who had not yet carried out telecollaboration but were aware of and interested in the activity and, 3) university students in European institutions who had carried out telecollaboration during their studies.

The survey was sent initially to approximately 800 educators and a further 200 students. However, the survey was also published on various academic mailing lists and websites, therefore it is impossible to establish how many educators finally received the request to participate in the survey. In total, 543 informants answered the survey. Of these, 341 were university educators and 202 were students. A total of 128 of the 341 educators reported have already organised a telecollaborative exchange in the past. These educators came from 20 different countries of the European Union. The survey findings in the following section are based on some of the data collected from these telecollaborative educators.

3. Survey findings

The survey reveals an interesting overview of the type of online intercultural exchanges which are being carried out across European universities. While it is not possible to go into great detail here, it can be said that European telecollaborators tend to organise exchanges which are bilingual, combining English with another European language and which involve partner classes which are predominantly from the USA, Germany, the UK, France and Italy. Exchanges tend to be relatively short in duration (one-three months) and involve students interacting with just one partner class. Interestingly, a significant majority of telecollaborators report having found their partners mainly through their own networks of personal contacts and colleagues and not through online mailing lists or websites. As regards the aims of their exchanges, telecollaborators tend to give more emphasis to the development of their students' intercultural competence than to their foreign language skills. To develop these competences, the exchanges predominantly involve task-types which engage learners in the 'discussion of different tasks and texts with their partners', 'the comparison of cultural products and customs' and 'personal presentations'.

Some more of the most interesting findings included the following:

- OIEs are strongly believed to have the potential of supporting physical mobility by engaging learners with students in their future host institution before departure, and also by supporting learners during their period abroad. However, there are very few examples of such exchanges currently being carried out.
- Lack of time and the difficulty in organizing online exchanges are seen to be the main factors hindering the take up of these projects by other educators. In many cases the lack of institutional recognition and support was also a factor.
- Telecollaboration can have different levels of integration into study programmes. Most practitioners assess the intercultural and communicative

learning outcomes of their exchanges. However participation in OIEs does not always bring students' academic credit and their work is not always institutionally recognised. The more these exchanges are 'recognised' and awarded academic credit, the more likely they are to be considered of value by students and faculty members.

- The impact of participating in OIEs is seen by students who have participated in projects to be educationally significant. Many reported that participating in a telecollaborative exchange led them to become more open to others, accepting and understanding of difference and to realise that their own points of view are not necessarily "the best or only ones". Many students reported establishing long term friendships with their telecollaboration peers, keeping in touch once exchanges are over and some even visiting one another. OIEs are often an incentive for students to engage in physical mobility.
- Telecollaborative exchanges are recognised by many universities as valuable activities for internationalisation and for the development of student mobility. However, institutions are unaware of the extra time and workload which such projects require and are either unwilling or unable to provide adequate support to staff who wanted to organise such exchanges.
- Telecollaboration is seen as a useful 'first step' on the way to developing physical mobility exchanges between institutions.

4. Welcome to uni-collaboration.eu!

In order to facilitate the take up of telecollaborative exchanges in universities around the world, the INTENT team is currently developing and trialling an online platform (www.uni-collaboration.eu) where educators and mobility coordinators can join and find everything they need to learn about and set up telecollaborative exchanges. The platform includes a wide array of resources and tools including the following:

- Partner-finding tool where educators can announce their classes which they wish to engage in online exchange or simply browse the other classes which are looking for partnerships.
- A databank of tasks and task sequences where educators can find activities for their students to carry out together with their partners.
- An e-portfolio which describes the competences of the telecollaborative learner and which can be used for assessment and self-assessment purposes.
- Training materials which provide background information and materials for any educator who wishes to learn more about telecollaboration.
- A case study databank where users can read about the many different models of telecollaborative exchange.
- A community of practitioners- forums where educators can discuss together their experiences of telecollaboration.
- Interactive features – educators can upload their own tasks, case studies etc and share their work with the community.



Figure 2. Homepage of the INTENT online platform.

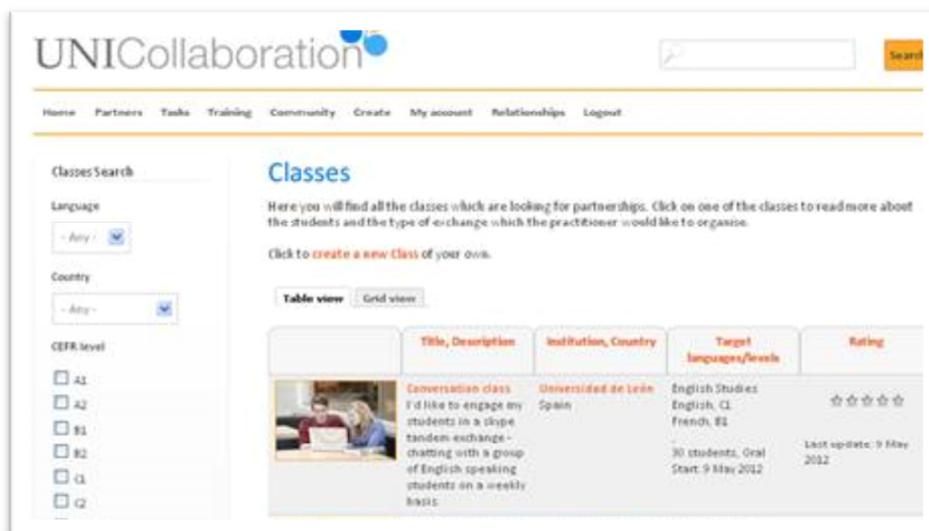


Figure 3. Sample class page from the INTENT online platform.

5. Workshops

2013 we will also be holding training workshops in universities around Europe to inform and support the teaching and learning community as well as related stakeholders and decision makers. Workshops will be held in Italy, France, the UK and Poland. The workshops will be free to attend and aim to provide a comprehensive introduction to university teaching staff, mobility coordinators and management who are interested in learning about organising and integrating telecollaboration into their institutions. To receive more information and to register, visit <http://www.scoop.it/t/intent-project-news> or write to: intentproject@gmail.com.

References

- Belz, J., & Müller-Hartmann, A. (2003). "Teachers negotiating German-American telecollaboration: Between a rock and an institutional hard place", *Modern Language Journal*, 87 (1), 71-89.
- Belz, J., & Kinginger, C. (2002). "The cross-linguistic development of address form use in telecollaborative language learning: Two case studies", *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 59(2), 189-214.
- Belz, J., & Müller-Hartmann, A. (2003). "Teachers negotiating German-American telecollaboration: Between a rock and an institutional hard place", *Modern Language Journal*, 87 (1), 71-89.
- Cohen, L. & Manion, L. (1985). *Research methods in education*. London: Croom Helm.
- Hauck, M. (2010). "Telecollaboration: At the interface between multimodal and intercultural communicative competence", in S. Guth & F. Helm (Eds.), *Telecollaboration 2.0: Language and intercultural learning in the 21 st century*. Bern: Peter Lang, pp. 219-248.
- Nunan, D. & Bailey, K.M. (Eds) (2009). *Exploring Second Language Classroom Research: A Comprehensive Guide*. Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning.
- O'Dowd, R. (2011). "Online foreign language interaction: Moving from the periphery to the core of foreign language education?", *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 368-380.
- Thorne, S. (2010). "The intercultural turn and language learning in the crucible of new media", in S. Guth & F. Helm (Eds.), *Telecollaboration 2.0: Language and intercultural learning in the 21 st century*. Bern: Peter Lang, pp. 139-165.
- Ware, P. (2005). "Missed communication in online communication: Tensions in fostering successful online interactions", *Language Learning & Technology* 9(2): 64-89. Available from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol9num2/default.html>. Last accessed 09/01/2013.

Acknowledgements

The INTENT project and the survey reported here have been developed with the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union. The survey mentioned in this paper was developed principally by Francesca Helm, Sarah Guth and Robert O'Dowd in their role as the main participants in this part of the project. However all the other project members also participated in the development and dissemination of the survey. More information about the INTENT project team can be found here: <http://intent-project.eu/?q=node/1>

NB

* This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This article reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Top