



Virtual exchange: moving forward into the next decade

Robert O'Dowd

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EDITORIAL



Virtual exchange: moving forward into the next decade

Introduction

In a recent editorial position paper in this journal, Jozef Colpaert (2020) rightly observed the dramatic growth of interest in the pedagogical activity of connecting students in structured online intercultural collaboration with peers in order to develop their foreign language, intercultural and digital competences. However, he also takes issue with the gradual move away from the term ‘telecollaboration’ towards ‘virtual exchange’ to describe this pedagogy. I found Colpaert’s article very important as it challenges practitioners and researchers such as myself to critically reflect on the terminology we use to describe what we do. For that reason, I was both delighted and honoured when he invited me to address some of the issues which he raises in his position paper. I also take the opportunity here to review and look for commonalities in the many ‘impact reports’ which have been published lately based on large scale projects and initiatives related to virtual exchange. I then conclude by looking to what the immediate future may hold for this activity.

On the term ‘virtual exchange’

Colpaert is by no means the first to question the use of the term ‘virtual exchange’ (VE) in the field of CALL research but his paper is undoubtedly the most detailed critique of the term to date. He begins his position paper in the following way:

‘One of the phenomena that has surprised me the most in recent months is the increasing frequency of the term “virtual exchange” compared to the initially more common term “telecollaboration” (p. 653). He explains his discomfort with the term by referring to the original meaning of the word ‘virtual’:

The original denotation of virtual, according to the same dictionaries, is ‘approximating reality’, ‘almost real’, ‘almost complete’, ‘almost or nearly as described, but not completely or according to strict definition’, or ‘being such in essence or effect though not formally recognized or admitted’ (p. 654).

The author expresses his concern that by using the term 'virtual', which carries the connotation of 'not being real', the activity may be somehow undervalued and that it merely serves to highlight the limitations of this activity compared to, for example, physical mobility programmes: 'The term "virtual exchanges" would suggest that online exchanges do have some limitations compared to real, physical exchanges' (p. 654).

Colpaert also argues that '[i]f activities are digital or online, then why not just use these terms?' (p.654).

These are all important points and this debate about the term is not new. With this in mind, it might be helpful to review the reasons why the term has become more prominent in recent years and why an organisation such as UNICollaboration (www.unicollaboration.org), which has its origins in the CALL community, has chosen to give prominence to the term VE.

When establishing UNICollaboration as an academic organisation to promote this activity in 2018, my colleagues and myself debated how we should refer to what we were promoting and researching. 'Telecollaboration', even though it was in common use in CALL circles since it was used by Warschauer (1996) and then by Belz (2002), was disliked by many colleagues because of its own connotations and its own limitations. Some suggested it sounded quite old fashioned, while others suggested that combining 'tele' (meaning 'at a distance') and 'collaboration' did not accurately capture the online and intercultural nature of what we do. We were also aware that the term 'telecollaboration' was almost exclusive to the field of foreign language education. The only other field of research that appears to use it is medicine – where it refers to using telecommunications technology to connect surgeons and other medical professionals to operating rooms in other locations (Cleary, 2004).

My own personal preference had been 'Online Intercultural Exchange' (OIE) and I had used this term in my two volumes which I edited on this topic (O'Dowd, 2007; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). I felt this term captured the essential elements of what we do – students from different cultural backgrounds working together in online networks.

However, in our deliberations at UNICollaboration, our own personal opinions were put to one side for one simple reason – our awareness that there were numerous other 'communities of practice' and networks in other subject areas and disciplines around the globe working in this very area and there was an urgent need for greater collaboration and communication between these groups and the 'telecollaborative' community coming from CALL. For this reason, we decided to name our organisation 'UNICollaboration: a cross-disciplinary

professional organisation for telecollaboration and virtual exchange in Higher Education' and our journal is called the 'Journal of Virtual Exchange'.

Although, as Helm (2018, p. 50) argues, 'it is not unusual that different traditions in disciplines (ranging from healthcare to education) lack a common terminology, groups often have their own terms, or their own perceptions of the same terminology', we believed that adopting a moniker which was more widely known would contribute to promoting more cross-community collaboration and greater synergies in our research.

But why was 'Virtual Exchange' the term we decided to use? Helm (2018) and 'The Study on the feasibility of an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange' (2017) carried out by PPMI & Democratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs identify one of the first official mentions of the term VE as coming from the founding of the 'Virtual Exchange Coalition' by the organisations, Soliya, iEARN and Global Nomads Group in 2011. The Group define VE as 'technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs'. Since then, the term had been taken up by numerous other initiatives and networks which work in the area including the Stevens Initiative, Soliya, Sharing Perspectives Foundation and the Global Nomads Group. We wanted to make the telecollaborative CALL community an active part of this cross-disciplinary community of practice and we felt that using the same terminology would help to achieve this.

Furthermore, we were also aware that funding organisations such as the European Commission and the Stevens Initiative were using the term. Already in 2016 European Commissioner Tibor Navracsics was tweeting about his intention 'to complement [Erasmus+] with virtual youth exchanges. ...I want to involve 2000 young people in this 'Erasmus Virtual Exchange pilot project' by the end of 2017, and 200,000 young people by the end of 2019'. In the US, the Stevens Initiative was established in 2014 to promote VE and provide funding for organisations to administer VE programmes between youth in the US, the Middle East and North Africa. Given that many researchers in telecollaboration would be striving to compete for funding and to participate in programmes organised by these stakeholders, we felt it would not be helpful if applications were using the term 'telecollaboration', for example, in calls for proposals related to 'Virtual Exchange'.

So there is definitely a certain amount of expediency in our reasons for using the term VE instead of 'Online Intercultural Exchange' or 'telecollaboration'. But I would also argue that the term we use for this activity is perhaps less important than the quality of its actual implementation. I suspect Colpaert might agree with me here as he also

highlights the need to focus on innovative applications of the activity and thereby move beyond 'the perfunctory "present yourself" and "talk about cultural differences" conversation types' (p. 655).

This brings us back to Colpaert's editorial position paper. Apart from having issues with the term 'virtual exchange, he also highlights a need for practitioners and researchers to explore the affordances which this activity can bring to foreign language education. He argues that 'telecollaboration affords many more activities than its physical counterparts' (p. 654) and points to activities such as the co-construction of digital artefacts, interacting in virtual worlds and peer criticism which are possible in contexts of VE. While this is undoubtedly true, I would suggest that explicit comparisons between VE and physical exchange (in the form of international student mobility, for example) is unlikely to be helpful for various reasons. First, such comparisons could be used to justify a reduction in funding for international mobility programmes and to create an unnecessary atmosphere of competition between these two areas of academic activity. Second, virtual and physical exchange are such different experiences, there is a clear risk of comparing apples and oranges. In physical exchange programmes, the language learning process takes place over long periods of time (usually several months) and involves learners participating in a wide range of communicative contexts, usually without the support of tutors or teachers. Class to class virtual exchanges, on the other hand, are usually short and intensive affairs (usually 6-8 weeks) where students engage in a series of carefully designed pedagogical tasks related to their subject area with a limited number of international partners and with the support of their teachers or facilitators. While both experiences involve situations of intercultural contact and communication, the learning experience is clearly different. As a recent consultation document for the European Parliament concluded: 'virtual formats are, in essence, different from physical mobility, although they can be perfectly used as a complement to or alternative for physical mobility. There is general agreement amongst scholars that neither of the forms of learning is an alternative to the other' (Buischool & Hudepohl, 2020, p. 6).

I would suggest, and Colpaert also recognises this, what we should be exploring is how both VE and physical mobility can be most successfully combined. This may come in the form of 'pre-mobility' VE programmes or 'blended mobility' which involves a deliberate combination of both physical mobility and VE. The above-mentioned report to the European Parliament concludes:

By incorporating a combination of physical, blended and virtual forms of mobility into a curriculum, students have greater opportunities to integrate an international learning experience into their portfolio and have more opportunities to develop competences such as intercultural and linguistic skills, online collaboration, media

and digital skills, online team work and networking, open mindedness, and critical thinking (p. 6).

Having now tried to justify the use of the term *virtual exchange*, in the following section I look at how interest in VE has grown in recent years and I explore the reasons for this development.

2020: the year virtual exchange finally came of age?

For those of us who have been working in the field of telecollaborative learning and virtual exchange for many years, the year 2020 certainly has been a hugely significant one for our area of activity. VE, in the form of telecollaboration and e-tandem learning, has been employed in foreign language education for over 25 years (Tella, 1992; Warschauer, 1995). However, 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 (O'Dowd, 2011).

Not only in foreign language education but in university education in general, VE had remained misunderstood and undervalued and, in many ways, it was lost between the different silos in which universities were organised. For many of those working in online education, it lacked the large-scale potential of MOOCs and other forms of online teaching. For some of those involved in international education, it was misunderstood as a form of competition to physical mobility programmes. For many lecturers and professors, it seemed to be something difficult to organize and unpredictable in its outcomes. For international mobility officers, it was seen as belonging to the domain of teachers, not international offices. In this sense, VE often fell between the different pillars of university education.

Over the past six years, this situation had begun to change slowly. In the United States, the Stevens Initiative was launched in 2015 to build global competence for young people in the US and the Middle East and North Africa by promoting and supporting the field of VE. In 2016, UNICollaboration, the transdisciplinary organization for telecollaboration and Virtual Exchange, was launched to support the research and practice of VE in university education. In 2017 and 2018, the European Commission granted funding for two Key Action 3 projects which provided training for university educators and also published large-scale research studies which provided evidence of the impact of VE on students and teachers in university education. Evaluating and Upscaling Telecollaborative Teacher Education (EVALUATE) (2017-2019) was a European Policy Experiment that studied the impact of VE on over 1000 students in initial teacher education across Europe, while

Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (EVOLVE) (2018–2020), looked at the learning outcomes from VE across all areas of higher education. In 2018 the Commission also launched its flagship project ‘Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange’ which ended in 2020. In the three years of the project it provided VE learning experiences to over 28,000 young people in Europe and the MENA region, and training to over 5000.

However, it was the onset of the COVID 19 in 2020 that drew the attention of university faculty and management to VE on a much larger scale. The lack of possibilities for study abroad during the pandemic led many to seriously consider how telecollaborative learning initiatives could be effectively integrated into curricula and internationalisation strategies in order to give students an international learning experience without physical mobility. It has been during this period that universities and organisations have moved to offer their teaching staff and international mobility coordinators training in order to enable them to organise VE in their classes and institutions. During 2020, training providers such as UNICollaboration and Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange provided large training courses for Spanish universities through the CRUE (The Spanish Conference of Rectors) and to German universities through the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service). University networks such as the Coimbra Group of Universities and the Compostela Group of Universities and organisations such as the European Association for International Education (EAIE) also organised training courses and information events about VE for their members. This has meant that, apart from teaching staff, senior management and international officers also became involved in the integration of VE into *internationalisation at home* strategies.

As foreign language departments also struggled to compensate for the lack of international mobility for their students during the pandemic, there was a strong interest in online platforms that provide ‘ready-made’ VE experiences based on foreign language practice for their students. These platforms (such as *Conversifi* (<https://www.conversifi.com/>), *Talkabroad* (<https://talkabroad.com/>) and *Linguameeting* (<https://www.linguameeting.com/>)) function in different ways but the majority connect foreign language students with native speakers in videoconferencing sessions, usually in exchange for a fee which can be paid by the institution or the students themselves. They then provide the students and/or their teachers with recordings of the conversations which can later be used as part of students’ course evaluation. This ‘outsourcing’ of VE takes a considerable organizational and technical burden off the teachers who no longer have to look for appropriate partners for their students but there is currently a lack of reliable research as to how learners can develop their linguistic and intercultural competences through such

un-mentored and often decontextualized virtual conversations with native speakers.

Significantly, 2020 was also the year that the European Commission began to outline how it sees VE being integrated into university education in its new programme. Both the Commission's document 'Communication from the Commission on achieving the European Education Area by 2025' (European Commission, 2020a) and the 'Digital Education Action Plan (21-27)' (DEAP) (European Commission, 2020b) suggest that there will be an important role for VE and online collaborative learning in the Commission's new programmes. Both documents state this will be in the form of blended mobility which, as was explained above, involves a deliberate combination of both physical mobility and VE. For example, the DEAP reports: 'Blended mobility will be "mainstreamed" (i.e., integrated) into the Erasmus programme by introducing a "virtual learning" component to Erasmus' (European Commission, 2020b, p. 38).

However, the document also signals that VE will play an important role in its own right (and not only as part of blended mobility initiatives) in the development of intercultural dialogue between young people: '...greater use will be made of virtual exchanges between young people and education institutions in Europe, and around the world, to further engage young people in intercultural dialogue and improve their soft skills' (p. 38).

The Commission also recognizes the different skill sets which VE can serve to develop in teachers. The Commission's 'Staff Working Document on the Digital Education Action Plan' states:

Virtual exchange activities help teachers to step away from their accustomed learning and teaching approaches and develop new skills to engage in linguistic, intercultural, and digital learning experiences, which they may not be confronted with in their day-to-day practice (European Commission, 2020c, p. 35).

In summary, it is clear that VE will be an important part of university foreign language education as we move forward into the next decade. But what have we learned about how VE works? The following section summarises some of the main findings and outcomes from recent impact reports and studies in the area.

What are we learning about virtual exchange?

In Colpaert's position paper, the author observes that the lion's share of the recent literature on VE has focused on learning goals and learning outcomes as opposed to reporting on the particular 'affordances' of the activity (p.655). I would completely agree with this observation and I

would suggest that there is a very good reason for this. Quite simply, having established how telecollaborative learning can work (i.e., its different models and applications), the research community is currently focussing on establishing to what extent VE can achieve the learning goals which are expected of it. While practitioners are aware of its potential, I would argue that it is our task to demonstrate its value to the educational community as a whole in order to ensure that it is taken up and integrated on a larger scale.

Against this background, the past three years have seen the publication of a plethora of impact reports and studies which present the findings or projects, initiatives and organisations who are engaged in promoting large-scale VE initiatives. For the most part, these publications present both qualitative and quantitative data on what students learn from VE and what teachers and institutions can do to support this learning. Thanks to these research reports and impact studies we are now able to see some common findings emerging in relation to student learning outcomes, how to provide support for teachers as well as examples of good practice for implementing VE in university classrooms. The studies referred to here are outlined in [Table 1](#) below.

Student learning outcomes

Undoubtedly the most significant finding which emerges from a review of the different impact studies and reports on large-scale VE initiatives

Table 1. Overview of impact reports on Virtual Exchange 2017–2020.

Year	Title of report	Organisation/Project
2017	SUNY COIL Stevens Initiative Assessment	SUNY COIL
2018	Evaluating Global Digital Education: Student Outcomes Framework	Global Cities Inc.
2019	Erasmus+Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2018	Erasmus+Virtual Exchange
2020	Erasmus+Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2019	Erasmus+Virtual Exchange
2021	Erasmus+Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2020.	Erasmus+Virtual Exchange
2019	Evaluating the Impact of Virtual Exchange on Initial Teacher Education: A European Policy Experiment	The EVALUATE Group
2019	Virtual Exchange as Innovative Practice across Europe Awareness and Use in Higher Education	EVOLVE: Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange
2020	The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Teachers' Pedagogical Competences and Pedagogical Approach in Higher Education.	EVOLVE: Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange
2020	The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Student Learning in Higher Education: EVOLVE Project Report.	EVOLVE: Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange
2019	Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report 2019	Stevens Initiative
2020	Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report 2020	Stevens Initiative

is the high number of results which the publications have in common. Even though these studies are based on various models of VE and involve learners from a wide number of geographical and institutional contexts, there are a number of student learning outcomes which appear repeatedly across the data.

The first of these findings is that VE is a very popular learning activity among students. The reports by Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, the Steven's Initiative, EVOLVE and EVALUATE all report high levels of student satisfaction with VE as a learning activity. Indeed, in many studies, students reported that they would highly recommend VE to their friends and classmates and in some cases, studies also reported that students often maintained the relationships and friendships after the VE had ended.

A second common finding is that students who engage in telecollaborative learning report developing cultural knowledge during their exchanges. This may be cultural information about the partner culture itself or about the relationship between the participating countries (Stevens Initiative, 2019). However, in many cases, students also reported learning factual information about many topics and social issues including immigration, religion, gender roles and the differing national reactions to the COVID-19 crisis (EVOLVE Project Team, 2020; Helm & Van der Velden, 2021; Tiven, Fuchs, Bazari, & MacQuarrie, 2018). Perhaps more significantly, students also reported a growing awareness of cultural diversity and becoming aware of their partners' multiple identities and the need to avoid regarding cultures as monolithic (EVOLVE Project Team, 2020; The EVALUATE Group, 2019).

Confirmation that students develop their foreign language skills is also well evidenced in the reports. In the 2020 Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange final report (Helm & Van der Velden, 2020), 79% of participants reported improvement in their foreign language skills (79%). In this report as well as in others (such as the EVALUATE report (2019) and the EVOLVE report on student learning outcomes (2020)), it was seen that participating in telecollaborative learning gives learners the opportunity to overcome their anxiety of communicating in a foreign language and also to use the foreign language in meaningful way about issues that are relevant to them. For many, VE is therefore a shift away from the traditional approach to foreign language learning which is often focussed on grammatical accuracy.

There is also repeated evidence across the publications (see, for example, the SUNY COIL report by Guth & Helm, 2017 and the EVOLVE report (2020) on student learning outcomes) that VE enables the development of a wide range of transversal or 'soft skills' which are considered very relevant for the modern workplace. Skills which are mentioned repeatedly across the studies include teamwork, flexibility, intercultural

collaboration, problem-solving as well as aspects of digital competence related to online communication skills.

Many studies also reported that their informants felt that they were now better prepared to communicate and collaborate with people from different cultures. However, the key to this was ensuring that the students had been engaged in interculturally challenging tasks which required high levels of negotiation and collaboration (Helm & Van der Velden, 2019; The EVALUATE Group, 2019). It appears that VE can best enhance students' collaborative and intercultural skills when they are confronted with a range of collaborative hurdles and challenges which require them to find creative ways to collaborate and communicate successfully with their international partners. Simply put, when tasks are carefully designed, VE can help push students out of their comfort zone and this is when skills and attitude development is most likely to take place.

Despite these many positive results, various studies acknowledge that when they investigated students' empathy levels in their quantitative surveys, this was not seen to have developed significantly during the VE (Stevens Initiative, 2019, 2020; The EVALUATE Group, 2019). The reports give various reasons for this, including the fact that VE projects may not last sufficiently to achieve such an impact or because of the so-called 'ceiling effect' which means that no development was identified because participants had rated themselves relatively high on these competencies in the pre-test surveys and were therefore unable to demonstrate an increase in the post-test.

Having said that, there was definite evidence that VE does contribute to attitude change in other areas. In the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange 2019 Impact Report, the authors found that there was significant overall gain in post-test measures of curiosity and self-esteem, as well as warmth to people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The exposure to different world views and beliefs was seen to heighten young people's critical thinking and appreciation of diversity. Helm & Van der Velden conclude: 'Strong evidence of intercultural sensitivity was found in some of the participants' reflections. Their experience had led them to question some of their assumptions, reflect on their own beliefs and behaviours and see the complexity of intercultural relations rather than minimising difference, or seeing a binary relationship of "us" and "them"' (2020, p.38).

It is clear from the evidence provided in these publications that VE is effective. But how can teachers be encouraged and supported as they take up this new methodology?

Supporting teachers

Many of the studies reviewed here (Nissen & Kurek, 2020; Stevens Initiative, 2020; The EVALUATE Group, 2019) also looked at the impact

of VE on the teachers who run this activity. They found that participation in VE projects provides teachers with valuable experience in continued professional development and methodological innovation. In particular, VE can be seen to open up opportunities for teachers to develop new professional partnerships and collaborative academic initiatives, to develop their own online collaboration skills and also to introduce more innovative approaches in their current teaching practices. In short, the impact on university teachers of running a VE often goes much further than the exchange itself.

However, the reports also coincide in the importance of providing teachers with adequate training in order to be able to carry out VE successfully. VE is recognized as a complex activity which requires knowledge and skills related to a number of areas including course integration, task design, choice of digital technologies and online coordination with international partner teachers. Teachers need therefore training in these areas and many reports call on universities to provide this training for their faculty.

Universities are also called on to provide sufficient recognition for the increased work which VE can involve for teachers (Nissen & Kurek, 2020; The EVALUATE Group, 2019). Teachers' engagement in VE initiatives requires time and a significant extra workload. For this reason, the reports are almost unanimous in their call for teachers to be supported through the provision of academic 'rewards' such as teaching awards, time release and the recognition of VE in national and institutional teacher evaluation systems and policy documentation. Some reports, such as the EVALUATE study and the Steven's Initiative 2019 impact study, also recommend the provision of funding for short periods of mobility which will allow teachers to travel and meet their partner teacher and plan their exchange together.

The EVALUATE report calls for '...the provision of funding for online and offline teacher training and for short periods of physical mobility which will enable teachers to meet and plan with partners. Second, decision makers must ensure that teachers are provided with the time and technological infrastructure necessary to follow training and to develop and implement their online international projects. Finally, a recognition of the workload and innovative character of VE should be reflected in national and institutional teacher evaluation systems, calls for projects, and policy documentation' (p. 14).

Many studies report that the recognition of teachers' work is still very much a work in progress in many university contexts. The baseline study carried out in the context of the EVOLVE project (Jager, Nissen, Helm, Baroni, & Rousset, 2019) found that there was, in 2018, no institutional recognition for VE in universities and that the activity was

not widely referenced in internationalization strategies. As a result, the study found that the main drivers for VE were generally highly motivated individual educators or international offices who received no explicit recognition of their work.

Good practice in virtual exchange. The steady growth in the number of large-scale impact studies such as the ones reviewed here also allows us to identify some examples of good pedagogical practice which educators can keep in mind when running VE in their classes.

The first of these is that educators should ensure that VE is beneficial for all the partner classes (Stevens Initiative, 2020). While all participating classes may not necessarily gain the same benefits from their telecollaborative project, each class should have the feeling that they are getting something from the experience. For example, in exchanges using English as a lingua franca, classes in non-English speaking countries may perceive a language learning benefit, while their partners in the US may benefit from the cultural learning outcomes. In any case, it is key that all participating classes feel they are achieving useful learning outcomes from their participation in the project.

A second key recommendation which appears regularly in the reports is ensuring that the VE is integrated into class curricula and that students will receive academic recognition for their work (Nissen & Kurek, 2020; Stevens Initiative, 2020; The EVALUATE Group, 2019). Students' participation in VE and their acquisition of competences during the project can be recognized in different ways, for example by the awarding of grades, ECTS credits and its recognition in the European Diploma Supplement as a virtual international learning experience. The opportunity to participate in short study visits to the partner university is also mentioned as a motivating outcome for students.

Many of the reports also refer to the importance of carefully balancing synchronous videoconferencing interaction with stages of asynchronous text-based interaction. The reports from 2018 and early 2019 underline the importance of introducing videoconferencing into exchanges as this form of communication is helpful for relationship building and overcoming the depersonalized nature of text-based discussions. For example, in the EVALUATE study (2019), the authors reported that students had regularly pointed out that the task-based focus of the exchanges and the text-based nature of the communication had led to a feeling that their collaborations were depersonalized and that they lacked the feeling of interacting with 'real people'. They found that the students had overcome this barrier by using communication tools which they used regularly in their everyday lives such as WhatsApp to communicate with their partners, while teachers also reported that regular videoconferencing had helped students to establish good working relationships together.

However, more recent reports also underline the need to combine videoconferencing with stages of asynchronous communication. The 2020 Steven's Initiative report found that educators had noted the benefit of incorporating asynchronous activities into a VE as they were in many ways less demanding on students. The EVOLVE study also concludes that '[w]hile synchronous videoconferencing appears to be an indispensable tool for socialising and relationship-building, it is one of the more technologically vulnerable tools at the same time' (2020, p. 9).

A further finding which is common to many of the reports is the importance of finding a balance between the formal tasks of the VE and more informal aspects such as personal communication and relationship building. Students need time to get to know each other as people and to establish relationships before they engage in the intense periods of collaboration which VE often requires. Educators should keep this in mind as they develop the task sequences which they will use during the online collaboration.

A further recommendation includes providing training for participants in how to interact successfully online with members of other cultures. The Stevens Initiative warn that '[b]ecause experience with cross-cultural communication varies among participants, basic training on communication norms and expectations should be provided in advance of the program'.

Finally, a significant number of the reports reviewed here underline the importance of task design for the success of the VE project. The different task types or topics can have a serious impact on student learning outcomes. In the EVOLVE study on student learning outcomes (2020), the authors found that information exchanges about daily life led students' interactions to remain to the surface and to focus on commonalities, rather than leading to a deeper understanding of their partners' perspectives. On the other hand, controversial topics were seen to have a bigger impact on students' learning, provided they were able to deal with them in an appropriate manner.

Conclusion

Colpaert's editorial is a valuable and timely contribution to the literature on VE and telecollaborative learning. In this paper he calls on practitioners and researchers to reflect on how we talk about our activity and what we focus on in our research in this area. In this paper I have tried to justify the use of the term *virtual exchange* and I have also endeavoured to explain why the focus of current VE publications is more on learning outcomes rather than the affordances of telecollaborative learning. I have tried to argue that if our community believes strongly in the value of telecollaborative learning we have a duty to broaden our community of practice and engage with communities of research and

practice which are working in other disciplines. Adapting our terminology may be part of that effort. It is also in our interest to demonstrate with our research that VE does what we claim it does. Greater knowledge of VE should lead to greater support for instructors and students, in the form of small grants for project preparation or the awarding of credit for the time-intensive work required for this pedagogical practice.

Of course, this does not mean we should stop exploring the affordances and innovative applications which VE offers foreign language education and international education in general. This is another area of VE research which needs to continue as we explore how VE can most effectively be applied in foreign language education and Internationalisation at Home initiatives in universities.

Following a dramatic few years in the development of VE, it is clear that the activity is now much more established and understood than ever before. The work of organisations and initiatives such as UNICollaboration and the Stevens Initiative as well as research emerging from projects such as EVALUATE, EVOLVE and Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange have meant that some basic principles are increasingly being promoted across academia. To conclude I would like to sum up these in the following manner:

1. Virtual Exchange is not in competition with physical mobility programmes. Instead, Virtual Exchange can be employed as a preparation for or complement to physical mobility which serves to enhance the range of international learning experiences which an institution offers its students.
2. Virtual Exchange is not an 'emergency tool' to be considered only in times of pandemics and limited international travel. There is a clear body of evidence which demonstrates its value for developing students' foreign language skills, intercultural competences, soft skills and digital competences. This evidence of its effectiveness as an educational tool demonstrates its value as an integral part of foreign language education programmes and Internationalisation at Home strategies.
3. Thanks to the extensive body of work on telecollaborative language learning, Virtual Exchange does indeed have one of its origins in the field of CALL. However, it behoves the CALL community to engage with the other organisations and communities of practice who are also engaged in this powerful pedagogical practice. Being willing to adopt our terminology may be an inevitable part of this process.

Of course, much work remains to be done but this requires that VE continues to receive interest and attention from all university stakeholders. Starke-Meyerring and Wilson (2008) warn that the success of globally networked initiatives such as VE depends on three key pillars – robust partnerships, innovative institutional policies and

innovative pedagogies (p. 222). This means that the future of VE will require the commitment and collaboration of three different groups in university education. First, international mobility officers will be needed to help establish international VE partnerships and networks for teachers in their institutions. Second, university management will be needed to introduce innovative institutional policies that facilitate the integration of VE into curricula and universities' internationalisation strategies. Finally, teaching faculty will need to explore new pedagogies and classroom practices which incorporate VE projects.

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