3 From 'CoCo' to 'FloCoCo': the evolving role of virtual exchange (practice report)

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Abstract

'CoCo' (Coventry-Colmar) is an online international learning exchange project involving students of French and International Relations at Coventry University (CU) and Networks and Telecommunications Engineering students at the Université de Haute-Alsace (UHA) in Colmar, France, running since 2014. In 2018, the exchange gained a new member through merging with an existing exchange between Coventry University and the Centro Florida Universitària (FU), in Valencia, Spain, becoming 'FloCoCo'. Where CoCo allowed for language and intercultural exchange between paired groups of UHA and CU students, FloCoCo now brings together FU, UHA and CU students, who complete a series of culture-based tasks, developing skills relating to intercultural communication and 'global citizenship' that are valued by today's graduate employers. Like its predecessor, FloCoCo aims at enhancing participants' intercultural awareness, communicative competence and digital fluency, providing an opportunity for 'virtual' international mobility and international intercultural online exchange. The following practice report discusses the most recent two iterations of FloCoCo in the context of the history of the exchange, drawing upon theories of (digital) discourse competence and online spaces to facilitate the best possible experience for participants in Virtual Exchanges (VEs).

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1.   Introduction

VEs are taking the lead where physical mobility has become a challenge for socio-economic reasons, and Brexit may increase this trend. In this context, we wish to highlight the multifaceted benefits of the VE in a higher education setting, including the possibility of VEs compensating for the demise of physical mobility. This paper will analyse developments in the FloCoCo exchange, building upon existing literature (namely Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018), while targeting the implications of digital innovations and political necessity for the evolving VE.

2.   Theoretical and conceptual framework

Canale and Swain (1980) outlined a model for communicative competence, divided into four elements: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. Walker and White (2013) adapted this model to suit the demands of the digital age, digital communicative competence, giving the following elements: procedural, socio-digital, digital discourse, and strategic. These models are crucial to students involved in FloCoCo: most students at the partner institutions are working in (at least) their second language (L2), even though participants now use English as a lingua franca, and the exchange takes place entirely digitally.

Socio-digital competence and digital discourse competence are particularly applicable, because the former involves "understanding what is appropriate to use in different social contexts and knowledge domains, in terms of both technology and language" (Walker & White, 2013, p. 8), and the latter as "the ability to manage an extended task, possibly using several applications and/or

types of equipment" (Walker & White, 2013, p. 9). Participants in FloCoCo must navigate the exchange by employing these skills: while there is much cultural crossover between France, Spain, and the UK, particularities can be hard to spot, and quickly escalate. This is particularly difficult to manage in a digital environment, as many linguistic and cultural subtleties are lost or easily misinterpreted (see Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018).

VEs such as FloCoCo also hinge on digital concepts such as *affinity spaces*, i.e "physical or virtual places in which people develop relationships […] based on shared interests" (Gee, 2005, p. 6), *connectivism*, i.e. "deriving competence from forming relationships" (Siemens, 2004, n.p), and *convergence culture* (Jenkins, 2006), in which the distinction between devices is broken down, and in the case of our students, where communication happens across multiple apps and fora. As a result, evolutions also occur concerning the role of the teacher as well as the student-teacher relationship.

These theories are all key to the continuing development of VE more broadly, but particularly relevant in the case of FloCoCo, as will be demonstrated below. As outlined by Orsini-Jones and Lee (2018, pp. 7-23), intercultural communicative competence continues to be relevant to the exchange, even in the wake of Brexit, but also in terms of the transition to a three-legged exchange, and particularly in combination with the theories outlined above.

3. Project practicalities

To complete FloCoCo, students at FU, CU and UHA are placed in small inter-institutional groups and have historically worked together throughout the project to complete three main tasks. The project is undertaken by staff members at participating universities (CU, UHA, and latterly FU); participants are students of languages at CU, of telecommunications at UHA, and of TEFL at FU. CoCo was historically a bilingual exchange; English became the lingua franca of the VE on its expansion into FloCoCo. Accordingly, the tasks were overhauled in the 2018 iteration of the exchange.

In **Task 1**, groups at each institution present themselves, their city, and university, through a three-minute video, in the language of the partner institution, and then comment on each other's productions. Students must take responsibility for delegation, distribution, and completion of work, as well as use of relevant technologies. Students are very interested in the lives of their peers, and tend to give very positive feedback.

Task 2, *Cultura*, is a series of short-response questionnaires exploring cultural attitudes, adapted from Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Maillet (2001). Students reflect on notions of 'home' culture and the other culture(s) represented in the collaboration. Students individually respond to word associations and short language tasks in their home institutions' L1. Groups then compare and contrast their responses, which tend to have some strong alignments but also some strong differences.

In **Task 3**, students discuss stereotypes and interview their partner group, ideally by synchronous means, but with the option to communicate asynchronously if they do not manage or are very shy. To structure their interviews, they first create a set of questions around cultural issues. This year, students were asked to consider a politically pertinent topic, as well as a more informal subject of their own choosing. Groups discussed Brexit, feminism and racism, as well as student life and related topics.

2018 saw the removal of the *Cultura* task for reasons to be detailed in the Discussion section. Task 3 was moved forward in the exchange and changed slightly to place more focus on the second part. A final task was devised to include a 'facilitated dialogue' around Taiye Selasi's (2014) TED Talk 'Don't ask me where I'm from, ask where I'm a local'.

4.   Discussion

The challenges associated with facilitating a VE vary from year to year, so preparation is key, and commitment is capital. Technology, language, and

motivation tend to be the dominant problems in carrying out FloCoCo, which has led to a need to adapt the tasks to suit both student requirements and the available tools. The move from a two-legged to a three-legged exchange has been challenging but predominantly positive.

For all we can say we live in a digital age, precious time continues to be wasted in the synchronous elements of the exchange. Skype and classroom technologies let down the VE continually. Thankfully, students and tutors alike are increasingly adept at convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), switching between devices and applications to find communication solutions. This year, the project successfully integrated an unprecedented variety of apps and programmes, including Facebook, FaceTime, Snapchat, Whatsapp, Skype, as well as email and Moodle. These issues are complicated by language concerns, as the vast majority of students worry that they will not be able to make themselves understood, or understand their partners. Nonetheless, the use of different technologies has allowed the students to explore and personalise their affinity spaces (Gee, 2005), customising their interactions to suit comfort levels. We were pleased to note that this seems relatively intuitive to students, and it is perhaps the ability to do so that has fostered friendships that have long outlasted the official exchange duration. Student motivation continues to be an issue, even when they know they are assessed, which is very difficult to address. Group work can thus lead to conflict based in perceived workloads. Tutors have begun to tackle this through discussions on responsibility and its links to employment and 'real world' situations. Varying contributions can be difficult to monitor, and raise the question of whether motivation should be intrinsic to the student or a tutor's responsibility.

In terms of the tasks, some changes clearly needed making to adapt to student responses and productive outcomes. Task 1 has consistently worked well; students are keen to share experiences. However, Task 2 appears to have stagnated in recent years. *Cultura* questionnaires, though methodologically sound in their own right, have become less appropriate tools in the context of current student demographics and the increasingly *multi*cultural classroom. *Cultura* is in any case designed for a binary exchange. With the addition of

the third member university, we felt the questionnaire was no longer suitable to FloCoCo, and intended to replace it, integrating a more creative task, which might unite the paired groups rather than dividing them. Task 3 could also be better adapted to broaden the students' competences in a global context. When it became clear that tasks were limiting rather than consolidating students' communicative competence, we took action to update them. This resulted in greater engagement from students, as well as more interactive affinity spaces throughout the exchange. The implementation of these changes was also made possible by the staff members at participating institutions having undertaken Erasmus+ training.

5.   Conclusion

Through VE and FloCoCo, we can learn a lot about student needs in the digital age, where physical mobility is not always possible. These socio-political elements are unpredictable, but present many pedagogical opportunities. While Brexit has dominated discussions over the last two iterations of the exchange, it has led to some unexpectedly positive outcomes, as detailed below.

The VE highlights the evolving relationship between social contexts and knowledge domains, pushing Walker and White's (2013) 'socio-digital competence' beyond the language-learning classroom and into the realm of skills in global citizenship. The students must constantly negotiate intercultural (mis)communication. FloCoCo tests students' 'digital discourse competence', but despite increasing cross-platform competence, they are less able to manage extended tasks. We suggest promoting greater understanding of the wider project through small tasks with adapted links and flow, as well as more strongly promoting inter-institutional teamwork.

The question remains of whether VEs can, or should, replace physical mobility schemes. The latter very strongly develop classical communicative competences, but do not make the digital model redundant. The strongly digital VE conversely lacks the immersive capacity of the physical. Arguably, nothing can replace the

benefits of physical mobility, but the VE will be crucial if it is the students' only exchange experience. Historically, it has been very difficult to arrange a physical component to this exchange. Students appear to be more invested in its digital form. The 2018 iteration of FloCoCo sought to maintain the immersive experience while remaining digital, by integrating a 'facilitated dialogue' into the exchange, to improve communication among all members. A new affinity space was also created within the existing VE, to support the development of three-legged conversations, offering a flexibility that represents a clear advantage over physical exchanges. A post-Brexit Europe may well witness increased communication with the use of similar tools within VEs.

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