

Chapter 39

Online Intercultural Exchanges Through Digital Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the affordances of a digital storytelling project in developing students' language, digital and other skills: learning and innovation, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, team working, and life and career skills. The project was undertaken by university English for Specific Purposes students and was conducted within an Online Intercultural Exchange between the Cyprus University of Technology and the University of Valencia. Its design was based on a Project-Based Learning (PBL) methodology. It incorporated active learning and multimodal resources and capabilities. The need for transforming language teaching pedagogies was borne in mind, as it is necessary for responding to an era of changes which requires students to be active producers of content, innovative, motivated and engaged in their own learning. The qualitative and quantitative findings were drawn from data gathered by means of an evaluation questionnaire administered to students upon completion of the project.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has so far been marked by significant developments in technology, economy, politics, and the environment, among others. Our world is characterized by rapid changes in every societal context which compel citizens to adapt their knowledge and competences in order to be able to achieve their goals. Educators worldwide are increasingly working towards developing innovative frameworks and new teaching approaches in order to accommodate their students' educational, life and career needs. Throughout the years, many educational approaches have been put into practice encompassing a wide variety of teaching and learning processes, activities and tasks. In this context, "digital storytelling has emerged over the last few years as a powerful teaching and learning tool that engages both teachers and their students" (Robin, 2009).

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This paper focuses on the affordances of CSI-TEL (Cyprus-Spain Intercultural Telecollaboration) and SCI-TEL (Spain-Cyprus Intercultural Telecollaboration) a project involving the use of digital storytelling for the development of higher education students' language, digital and various 21st century skills, such as life and career skills; learning and innovation skills; as well as information, media and technology skills (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007). These skills include competences such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, media literacy, technology literacy, innovation, leadership, accountability and responsibility, among others. Such competences have always been critical in education; however, they have gained greater importance in the fast-paced, constantly changing, highly competitive and digitised world we live in. The project was undertaken by university English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students and was carried out within the framework of an online intercultural exchange between the Cyprus University of Technology (CUT) and the University of Valencia (UV). Its design was based on a Project-Based Learning (PBL) methodology; thus, it incorporated all the elements of this teaching method. These are: key knowledge, understanding and success skills, challenging problem or question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and reflection, critique and revision, and public product. Apart from enhancing students' language and 21st century skills, the project aimed at enriching the ESP curriculum in order to promote students' active participation, engagement and involvement in their own learning. In addition, the project was designed so as to be challenging and enjoyable, requiring the orchestration of multimodal resources and capabilities.

ONLINE INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Within a PBL framework, two teaching approaches were combined in the project in an effort to produce a synergy so as to promote students' learning gains: Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) and Digital Storytelling (DST). The effectiveness of this combination has previously been reported in the literature, namely in connection to the students' involvement in their learning process leading to the acquisition of the target language and its culture as well as the use of technology to support learning-by-doing in authentic situations and in collaboration with foreign counterparts. In addition, the combination of OIE and DST can create opportunities for the creation of artefacts by the students themselves and the facilitation of contextualised, in-depth cultural awareness (Sevilla Pavón & Gimeno Sanz, 2017).

Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE), Online International Learning (OIL), COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning), Telecollaboration, eTandem or Teletandem are different names which have been used in the last decade to refer to a form of virtual mobility which is being increasingly adopted by university educators in Europe and elsewhere as a supplement for physical student mobility (O'Dowd, 2013; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018) or even as a substitute of it. Foreign language telecollaboration refers to virtual intercultural interaction and exchange projects between classes of foreign language learners in geographically distant locations (O'Dowd, 2007). It has also been defined as an Internet-based exchange aimed at developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Guth & Helm, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, within the general framework of OIE, the main tasks that students participating in the CSI and SCI-TEL project were asked to complete in their transnational telecollaboration groups revolved around Digital Storytelling. DST can be defined as the blend of the longstanding art of telling stories and the 21st century practice of putting together a variety of available contemporary multimedia tools, including graphics, audio, video, animation, and web publishing (Lambert, 2002; Robin, 2009;

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