

Final considerations

This book is based on an understanding of identity as being discursively constructed and reconstituted every time we engage in interaction. This implies that just as contexts and practices can limit opportunities for learners to engage in identity work, contexts and practices can also be designed to offer learners enhanced possibilities for social interaction and positioning. This is one of the aims of virtual exchange as conceptualised in this book. So what kind of virtual exchange contexts can and should we design to offer enhanced possibilities for these kinds of interaction? Here I have explored one particular model of virtual exchange, but of course there is no one solution that ‘fits all’. What I seek to do here in this final chapter is not provide guidelines, but consider some of the implications of this study and ask questions that as educators we can reflect on as we design and integrate virtual exchange into our activity. I then close with recent developments as regards virtual exchange on the policy level, and the implications this has for educators working in the field.

In relation to the situatedness principle of the framework presented in this book and its application to our own contexts we might ask ourselves what are the identity positionings that we make relevant for our students? What kind of structural and power asymmetries are embedded in these contexts and identities and how can we address them?

Educational contexts are never neutral, hence the importance of exploring and reflecting upon the assumptions underlying our practice. Furthermore, all contexts of interaction have power dimensions embedded within them. What we can learn from the fields of conflict transformation and peace studies (Agbaria & Cohen, 2000; Saunders, 1999) which have fed into the design of the virtual exchange explored in this study is the importance of being aware of structural power asymmetries, observing and reflecting on interaction and power dynamics,

and having tools and strategies to challenge them. Nonetheless, becoming aware of and seeking to address asymmetries in power does not mean that they will disappear (Bali, 2014).

The concepts of ‘imagined identities’ and student investment in learning can be useful tools in reflecting on the situated virtual exchange contexts we develop. In this study, the imagined identity proposed by Soliya was likened to the ‘networked cosmopolitan’, an individual with a particular interest in engaging with the ‘other’ through their transnational network and working towards a more empathetic society. As regards the virtual exchange contexts we create for our students we might ask what prospective identities does it make relevant? Are these of interest to the students? How do these relate to the social world and current issues around us?

Teacher education is one area in which virtual exchange is increasingly being adopted with the aim of preparing future teachers with the experience and desire to design and implement virtual exchanges once they have their own classes (Dooly & Sadler, 2013, 2016; Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018). In virtual exchanges which involve pre-service teachers and students of education, there is a clear prospective identity that participants share – the networked teacher with intercultural awareness and digital literacies, members of a transnational community of practice (Dooly, 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Dooly & Tudini, 2016; Sánchez & Manrique, 2018).

In relation to the mediation principle, we might want to ask ourselves to what extent are we aware of the affordances of the tools we are using for interaction? Do we give students the opportunity to develop awareness of how multiple modes can be used effectively (Guichon & Cohen, 2016) for interaction and identity construction?

As Thorne, Sauro, and Smith (2015) write: “enhancing one’s ability to be agile and adept across communicative modalities should be a primary focus of instructed L2 education” (p. 229). Offering students opportunities for interaction in a range of modalities and for understanding and exploring the affordances

of different tools for different purposes is one way of doing this. This entails teachers developing semio-pedagogical competence (Develotte, Guichon, & Vincent, 2010) and being able to assess the affordances of each medium for identity work. Kern (2015) suggests that we should foster learners' reflection on how people create social identities in the process of designing meaning in speech, writing, and gesture. One way of doing this would be to engage them in a similar analysis to what I have done in this thesis, have them observe video recordings of their interactions. Kern and colleagues have called it 'la salle de retrospection' (Kern, 2014), whereby their student partners would watch, review, and reflect on recordings of their interactions, a practice also undertaken with teacher trainees (Guichon & Cohen, 2016).

Finally, in relation to the principles of positionality, indexicality, and relationality, we might ask ourselves whether we create opportunities for our students to have a wider range of discourse identities? How can we involve students in interactions where they engage not only in adequation to others, but also distinction, where they can disagree and challenge one another and ask questions which seek to acquire greater understanding of an issue? In what ways can we bring students' transportable identities into play? To what extent can we challenge and denaturalise essentialist and commonsense assumptions as regards identities? How can we raise students' awareness of the ways in which identities can and indeed are used (implicitly and explicitly) to position people and empower or disempower them?

In order for students feel comfortable disagreeing with and challenging one another it is important to create a safe space in which this can happen. Before engaging in deep discussions, students generally need to break the ice and get to know one another, and they also need to communicate on a sustained basis to reach a level of trust where they may be able to express what they feel. In the model of virtual exchange explored in this study, it was facilitators that supported participants in creating this kind of space, leading them through the group process so they established a collective identity that could be likened to a community of inquiry (Hauck, Galley, & Warnecke, 2016). While the facilitators maintained an institutional identity through most of the interactions, the participants engaged in

a range of identity positionings and also discourse identities – advancing beliefs, challenging one another, and explaining and evaluating arguments. Through collective reflections on the interactions the participants re-aligned to one another and the group at the end of each session. Clearly all groups, and indeed facilitators, are different, as are their interactions, and the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other groups or educational contexts. Facilitators in this case were not teachers or content experts, but rather facilitators of a process. The extent to which orientation to this kind of facilitator identity is desirable or indeed feasible for teachers will clearly vary on individual and situational factors.

Since I embarked on the original study which formed the basis of this book many things have changed. On the geo-political level, since the interactions took place the so-called ‘Arab Springs’ in Tunisia and Egypt have not brought about the change that was hoped for¹. Syria, which was the last country to engage in a people-led revolution, is now devastated by a war which has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the displacement of millions of people. Palestinians continue to live, and protest, under occupation with over a hundred casualties in this year alone. At the time of writing the European Council² has decided to strengthen borders and close the Mediterranean route into Europe – which will inevitably lead to further deaths in the Mediterranean, the ‘graveyard of European values’³. In the United States migrant children and families face indefinite detention and separation if caught crossing the US border illegally⁴. Populist right-wing parties are gaining popularity and winning elections in Europe⁵ and beyond, xenophobic populism and hate speech are, unsurprisingly, on the rise⁶.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/arab-spring-five-years-on-writers-look-back>

2. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/european-council-conclusions-28-june-2018>

3. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/04/mediterranean-graveyard-european-values-150422050428476.html>

4. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/30/migrant-children-and-families-now-face-indefinite-detention-by-us>

5. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/21/in-europe-the-only-choice-is-right-or-far-right/>

6. https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/Annual_Reports/Annual%20report%202017.pdf

The need to make stronger links between conflict transformation, peace studies and intercultural dialogue seem to be coming closer as our societies face times of increased tensions and hate towards the ‘other’. Policy makers (in some spheres) are calling on educators and educational institutions to address these tensions.

In terms of virtual exchange there have been important developments on a policy level with substantial investments. In the US, the Chris Stevens Initiative “a public-private initiative”⁷ was launched in 2015 and is seeking to promote collaborative projects between the US, Middle East, and North Africa. The European Commission launched the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project at the beginning of 2018, which targets Europe and the Southern Mediterranean and aims to “promote intercultural dialogue and improve the skills of at least 25,000 young people through digital learning tools over the next two years”⁸. This latter initiative brings together the two approaches to virtual exchange described in Chapter one, telecollaboration, which regards small-scale projects developed bottom-up by partner teachers, and the type of online facilitated dialogue explored in this study. Online facilitated dialogue, such as the Soliya Connect Program, is one of the activities that this pilot project is promoting. Another activity is training for educators to collaboratively design curricula for transdisciplinary virtual exchange projects that are supported with synchronous facilitated dialogues⁹.

This increased interest for virtual exchange is no doubt good news, but at the same time it raises some concerns. Like other educational activities that receive funding, virtual exchange is a form of ‘soft power’¹⁰. There is a risk that it can be ‘hijacked’ to meet neo-liberal interests, governments’ political and ideological agendas, and be used as a tool not to foster greater understanding and mutual

7. <http://stevensinitiative.org>

8. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-1741_en.htm

9. https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual_en

10. https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/erasmus-virtual-exchange-study_en.pdf

engagement with different perspectives and complexity, but rather to further exacerbate inequalities. As [Bali \(2014\)](#) writes,

“[d]ialogue can be potentially colonizing, as it empowers one group by inherently being on their terms and serving their interests ([Burbules, 2000](#); [Gorski, 2008](#); [Jones, 1999](#)). Even benign dialogue can provide colonizers with a tool for ‘surveillance and exploitation’ ([Bhabha, 1994](#), p. 99, cited in [Jones, 1999](#), p. 309)” (pp. 213-214).

Virtual exchange has the potential to challenge the hegemonising forces of neoliberal, colonial approaches to foreign language teaching ([Train, 2010](#)), international education, and applications of education technologies. It is important however that we, as educators, practitioners, and/or researchers, constantly assess and interrogate policies, practices, and perspectives.



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Emerging identities in virtual exchange

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