Chapter 1

Introduction

This book, as the title suggests, is about exploring identities within an educational framework called Virtual Exchange. Some readers may not be familiar with this term, or indeed the practice of virtual exchange, so my first task in this introduction is to provide a definition, which is no easy task given the many types of virtual exchange currently in use.

In a recent project funded by the European Commission, which brought together practitioners, researchers, and virtual exchange providers, we set ourselves the task of coming up with a common definition that all partners felt comfortable with. What we came up with was by no means a slender definition, but rather a complex, articulated definition of virtual exchange which has provided this volume with a useful starting point.

"Virtual exchange is a practice, supported by research, that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators. Virtual exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology.

Virtual exchange aims to allow an increasing number of people to have a meaningful intercultural experience as part of their formal and/or non-formal education. This type of activity may be situated in educational programmes across the curriculum in order to increase

1. The EVOLVE (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange) project, launched in January 2018 and led by Sake Jager at the University of Groningen, aims to mainstream virtual exchange as an innovative form of collaborative international learning across disciplines in higher education institutions in Europe and beyond; https://evolve-erasmus.eu/
mutual understanding and global citizenship, as well as in non-formal education projects. Virtual exchange also fosters the development of what have been recognised as employability skills, such as digital competence (the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively online), foreign language competence, communication skills, media literacy, and the ability to work in a diverse cultural context.

Virtual exchange is:

- **sustained**: unfolding over time with regular, intensive interaction;
- **technology-enabled**: using new media, digital, and/or mobile technologies;
- **synchronous or near-synchronous**: based on regular meetings using high social presence media;
- **people-to-people**: involving inclusive, intercultural collaboration and dialogue that bridges differences and distances and inspires action with a long term positive impact on relationships;
- **learner-led**: following the philosophy of dialogue where participants are the main recipients and the main drivers of knowledge; learning through dialogue means that participants will be seeking mutual understanding and co-creating knowledge based on their own experiences.
- **facilitated**: with the support of trained facilitators and/or educators;
- **educational**: integrated into formal and/or non-formal educational programmes and activities to develop measurable increases in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that foster pro-social behaviours;
- **structured** to foster mutual understanding: covering topics related to identity, empathy, perspective taking, critical reflection, intercultural understanding, and helping participants to engage in constructive conversations in the face of ontological and epistemological differences; a key tenet of virtual exchange is that intercultural understanding and awareness are not automatic outcomes of contact between different groups/cultures”².

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². https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/
It is perhaps easier to define what virtual exchange does not represent. Learning approaches that do not align with what we have described as virtual exchange include distance learning courses, massive open online courses, and virtual mobility formats which do not include sustained interactions between small groups of students. In these aforementioned models of online education, the focus is very much on content rather than sustained interaction between students, and thus the virtual exchange mandate for intense person-to-person engagement is not met. In addition, social media groups, unmoderated and unstructured online interactions, and one-off video-conferences are not considered virtual exchange for they lack a pedagogy oriented towards sustained interpersonal interaction.

A possible reason why defining virtual exchange is challenging is that somewhat heterogeneous virtual exchange models and approaches have been developed, in various contexts, in order to meet a diverse range of objectives.

Language educators have for over two decades been practising and researching what we call telecollaboration, defined in 2003 by Julie Belz as “institutionalized, electronically mediated intercultural communication under the guidance of a languacultural expert (i.e. teacher) for the purposes of foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence” (p. 2). This pedagogic practice has traditionally entailed class-to-class exchanges designed around activities collaboratively created by language teachers working in different contexts who share similar objectives of having students use language to engage with ‘others’ in authentic meaning-making. Students interact with one another in various configurations, from one to one, small groups, or whole classes, using asynchronous and/or synchronous internet communication tools.

On the other hand organisations have developed and implement specific models of virtual exchange grounded in principles of inter-group theory, dialogue, and conflict transformation. These are larger-scale exchanges involving hundreds

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3. For an in depth historical overview of the pedagogical underpinnings of telecollaboration/virtual exchange, see the introductory chapter by Dooly and O’Dowd (2018) in the book entitled: *In this together: teachers’ experiences with transnational, telecollaborative language learning projects*.

4. For example, Soliya (www.soliya.net) and the Sharing Perspectives Foundation (https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/)
of students from multiple institutions across the world and have been developed
to engage students in small-group facilitated dialogue sessions in which they
address socio-political issues such as immigration, European citizenship,
politics, religion, and terrorism, to name but a few.

This book attempts to bring together my experience in these two different
areas of virtual exchange, though I am aware that virtual exchange has also
developed in other contexts. In it, I draw on my identities as a language
teacher, practitioner, facilitator and researcher of both models of virtual
exchange. Adopting an ethnographic, interaction-based approach, I analyse
interactions from a group of students that took part in a large scale, online
facilitated dialogue model of virtual exchange, the Soliya Connect Program.
But first of all, some considerations as to why one would want to engage
students in virtual exchange.

1.1. Why virtual exchange?

Virtual exchange is not a goal in itself, and as it gradually becomes part of
institutional practices and educational policy, it is important to ask ourselves
what our aims are as we engage students in this activity. One possible reason
might be to ‘equip learners to participate together in a global world’, but what
exactly do we mean by this?

It is worth taking the time to examine some of the assumptions that underlie our
practice and the beliefs we have about knowledge systems (epistemologies) in
a changing world.

5. This book is based on my PhD thesis, “I’m not disagreeing, I’m just curious”: Exploring identities through multimodal
interaction in virtual exchange, which can be found at: https://www.educacion.gob.es/teseo/mostrarRef.do?ref=135168

6. For example, the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Centre of the State University of New York
(SUNY) has developed a model of interdisciplinary class to class virtual exchange whose aim is to extend the benefits of
international education to a broader range of students and staff of universities.

7. This alludes to 2011 discussions about internationalisation of higher education, when in face of the growing obsession
with numbers and statistics regarding mobility and internationalisation, Brandenburg highlighted that internationalisation
is not a goal in itself, but a means to an end, an instrument to achieve something; https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/
the/article/view/8533/7667
Andreotti and de Souza (2008) offer a set of pedagogical tools, stimuli for reflection which can help us, as educators, engage with debates around the role of global learning/education in a ‘knowledge society’. I have found these to be particularly useful in exploring the issues around why and how we might engage learners in virtual exchange. One of the tools presents us with two different ways of analysing this idea that the role of education is to ‘equip learners to participate together in a global world’, deconstructing the terms ‘global society’, ‘participate’ and ‘equip’ according to two dominant ways of thinking and of viewing the world.

The Newtonian, or Modernist way of thinking, is represented by the metaphor of the world as a mechanical clock, whereby a global society is structured and ordered. This type of world can be understood as a whole through the analysis of its parts and is thus predictable and can be engineered. A ‘good and ideal society’ is based on a universalist view of what is real and ideal, which determines a specific course of action to achieve this. Interpretations which diverge from the above assumptions are deemed not completely ‘rational’ or ‘developed’ and thus are suppressed or ignored.

Participation in a Modernist world would entail having absorbed the ‘right’ information and being able to reproduce, or adapt oneself to, authorised ways of thinking and behaving (similar to what Freire (1984) called the ‘banking model’ of education). Conflict and difference would be seen as obstacles to be suppressed, controlled, or managed, because establishing consensus is a priority. Equipping learners to participate in this kind of society would thus involve the transmission of specific knowledge and the nurturing of skills and mindsets which would support the maintenance and continuing realisation of this type of society (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008, p. 9).

An alternative way of viewing the world is based on a complex systems paradigm, using the metaphor of the world as a living system with inter-related parts and processes. From this perspective, global society is imagined as diverse, inter-connected, multi-faceted, and in constant flux. Transformations constantly take place as the different parts and systems interact with one
another, but these systems cannot survive in isolation, so it is the exchanges and relations within and between systems which drive change. Different meanings and interpretations, ways of seeing and knowing, are seen as representing the diversity of this world, which is central to survival (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008, p. 10).

Within this world view, participation would mean the evaluation, interrogation, and connection of different types of information. This would entail being able to live with difference, insecurity, and viewing conflict as being potentially productive. Equipping learners for this type of world would mean exposing them to different models of thinking, strategies for establishing relationships, shifting positions and perspectives according to changing contexts, and being able to live with and navigate complexity and uncertainty.

Virtual exchange, as conceptualised in this volume, is more grounded in the second of the world views described above. It is seen as a reflective, experiential approach to education which aims to encourage participants to engage with difference, to assess and interrogate information and perspectives, and to explore and negotiate identities, their own as well as those of others, through online, intercultural interactions with distant peers.

1.2. A brief history of virtual exchange

Though the term *virtual exchange* is relatively new, the practice is not and has developed in several different spheres: intergroup dialogue and conflict transformation, global learning, and foreign language education – and quite possibly other fields that I am not aware of.

The origins of virtual exchange have been linked to the work of iEARN and the New York/Moscow Schools Telecommunications Project\(^8\) (NYS-MSTP) which was launched in 1988 by Peter Copen and the Copen Family Fund.

This project stemmed from a perceived need to connect youth from the two countries during a time which was marked by tensions between the United States and the U.S.S.R. that had developed during the Cold War. With the institutional support of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, and the New York State Board of Education, a pilot programme between 12 schools in each nation, was established. Students worked in both English and Russian on projects based on their curricula, which had been designed by participating teachers. The programme expanded in the early 1990’s to include China, Israel, Australia, Spain, Canada, Argentina, and the Netherlands. The early 1990’s saw the establishment of the organisation iEARN9 which became officially established in 1994 and included the countries which took part in this first project.

These “global learning networks” challenged the prevalent top-down, transmission model of education as they were based on online intercultural collaborations which derived their impact from “a vision of how education can enact, in microcosm, a radical restructuring of power relations both in domestic and global arenas” (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p. 8). The approach which is embodied in these projects, such as the Orillas project, centered around collaborative critical inquiry in which students are encouraged to reflect critically on experiential and social issues.

In the field of foreign language education, virtual exchange is more commonly associated with telecollaboration (Belz, 2002; Dooly, 2008; Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018; Guth & Helm, 2010; O’Dowd, 2006; Warschauer, 1996) or online intercultural exchange10 (O’Dowd, 2007; O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016). This practice developed around a critical perspective on the ‘traditional’ foreign language classroom, which was seen to offer learners limited opportunities for interaction and for learning. Like the iEARN projects, it has drawn inspiration from the work of educators such as Mario Lodi with his class newspapers in Italy, Celestine Freinet's work in France early in the 20th century, and from

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10. I shall use the terms online intercultural exchange and telecollaboration to refer to the literature about virtual exchange in foreign language educations to be consistent with the literature.
global education networks such as Riel’s (1993) Learning Circles project which opened up opportunities for interactions outside the classroom (see Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016 for an overview of the history of online intercultural exchange, and Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018 for a history its pedagogical underpinnings).

1.3. Foreign language learning, research and virtual exchange

A considerable body of research has been carried out by foreign language educators and researchers of telecollaboration and online intercultural exchange, with hundreds of journal articles on the theme, dedicated volumes (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Dooly, 2008; Guth & Helm, 2010; O’Dowd, 2007; Warschauer & Kern, 2000), journal special editions (Belz, 2003; Lewis, Chanier, & Youngs, 2011), and a book series, *Telecollaboration in Education* (e.g. Dooly & O’Dowd, 2012). Telecollaboration research has progressed from collections of classroom practice and anecdotal research to in-depth studies of online interaction and exchange. Research studies have reported on the many outcomes of different telecollaborative projects, mainly in higher education contexts, such as increased motivation and linguistic output (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004; Warschauer, 1996, 1998), gains in language development, accuracy and fluency (Kӧtter, 2003; Lee, 2006), intercultural communicative competence (Belz, 2007; Möllering & Levy, 2012; O’Dowd, 2006), pragmatic competence (Belz & Kinginger, 2003), and multimodal communicative competence (Dooly & Hauck, 2012; Hampel & Hauck, 2006), to name but a few.

The research has also documented failure and difficulties, which have been attributed to a wide range of factors. The assumption that intercultural learning would automatically result from the contact and interaction with distant ‘others’ was challenged from the outset as researchers have, Lamy and Goodfellow (2010) point out, readily identified difficulties, tensions, and failure in telecollaboration projects (e.g. Kramsch & Thorne, 2002). There are some critical issues in telecollaboration and online intercultural exchange that are particularly relevant to this study on identity and virtual exchange. The first regards the way culture
is sometimes conceptualised in telecollaborative exchanges and the limited identity positionings for learners which result from this (Helm, 2017). The second is the difficulty of engaging learners in online intercultural exchange, so that they go beyond ‘assumptions’ of similarity and adopt a critical, intercultural stance (Ware & Kramsch, 2005). I shall explore these a little further in the pages to follow.

1.3.1. Critical issue 1: limited identity positionings

Participants in telecollaborative exchanges tend to be discursively constructed in terms of national languages, identities, and cultures (Train, 2006) which are represented as static and essentialist, that is they are seen to have an underlying and unchanging ‘essence’. As Train (2006) writes, the field is characterised by “the assumption of one-nation-one-culture-one-self as the only desirable model of community, language, culture and identity” (p. 257). This assumption is closely linked to ‘native speaker’ ideologies and ‘standards’ of national languages which are still dominant in the discourses of foreign language teaching and, indeed, online intercultural exchange. These ideologies have marginalised and limited the identity positioning of the language and intercultural learner.

Telles (2014), who has promoted and carried out extensive research on Teletandem\textsuperscript{11}, for example, has found that many of the interactions taking place between pairs of students are characterised by inherent essentialism. The content discussed in the interactions is, he writes, based on repetitive, common sense conceptualisations of nationality and culture, and partners focus on marking differences in the interactions. As Telles (2014) writes:

“In line with Piller’s thoughts, the discussions deal with the twin problems of essentialism (‘people have a culture’) and reification of national and ethnic identity as culture (‘people from group X behave in ways that are static, internally similar and different from other groups’) (Piller, 2012, pp. 6-7)” (p. 4).

\textsuperscript{11} Teletandem is a bilingual model of online intercultural exchange
This position has been echoed by several other researchers, for example Ortega and Zyzik (2008) who highlight the persistent identification of a fixed culture with “so-called native speakers as a homogeneous group” (p. 341). Part of the problem in their view is the non-questioning of the meaning of ‘culture’ in the models of intercultural competence (Kramsch, 2001) that telecollaboration practitioners have drawn upon (Helm, 2017, p. 6).

The potential of online intercultural exchange in offering opportunities for identity work has been recognised by scholars such as Block (2007/2014), Kramsch (2009), and Norton (2000/2013), but is yet to be fully and broadly achieved. As Norton and Toohey (2011) attest, most research on identity has been carried out in the field of second (L2) language learning and, in particular, immigrant learners (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Norton, 2000/2013). Identity performance in digital contexts such as social networks, online gaming sites, and fanfiction has recently become a rich area of research (Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015), but much less work has been carried out in the foreign language classroom (Block, 2007/2014) or in the fields of online intercultural exchange and computer-assisted language learning (Gee & Lee, 2016).

At the Second International Conference on Telecollaboration in Higher Education12, David Little (2016) pointed out that foreign language education is still characterised by a mismatch between aspirations and outcomes. He described a widespread failure to question traditional teaching and learning dynamics and to engage students’ identities in the process of language learning. He also provocatively asked:

“Will emerging telecollaborative practice contribute to the evolution of a new learning-and-teaching dynamic that extends learners’ identity and their capacity for agentive behaviour, or will it simply add some extra limbs to a pedagogical tradition that has long been sclerotic?” (Little, 2016, p. 55).

1.3.2. Critical issue 2: fostering a critical, intercultural stance in learners

The second issue which I address is perhaps the one that has led to the most persistent questioning and reflection: the difficulty in getting students to engage in deeper levels of interaction (Dooly, 2011; Helm, 2013; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; O’Dowd, 2003; Ware & Kramsch, 2005) so that they move beyond the ‘assumption of similarity’ and manage to take a critical, intercultural stance (Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, 2005).

In order to address this issue, we need to ask ourselves what it is we are aiming for in our practice. The communicative competence models on which much of foreign language teaching and also telecollaboration are based have been called into question by many (Kramsch, 2014; Lamy & Goodfellow, 2010; Little, 2016; Schneider & von der Emde, 2006; Train, 2006). As stated by Helm (2017), some of the sociocultural strategies embodied in this model, particularly those for avoiding conflict, and the notion of effective or successful communication are seen as representing a form of cultural imperialism.

Schneider and von der Emde (2006) take issue in particular with Savignon and Sysoyev’s (2002) “sociocultural strategy for maintaining a dialogue of cultures”, which is based on the assumption that “mutual understanding” will take place in a “spirit of peace” if one of the interlocutors suppresses their points of view. This “strategy”, they point out, implicitly requires learners to “adopt questionable [native speaker] standards and forego their privileges as [non-native speakers]” (Schneider and von der Emde, 2006, p.181). The findings of other researchers, for example Ware in her 2005 study, support this stance as she found that in order to avert miscommunication, that is misunderstandings or tensions in communication with their peers, students used avoidance strategies which could lead to “missed” communication, that is to say, missed opportunities for meaningful intercultural learning (Ware, 2005, p. 66). This preoccupation with conflict avoidance evokes the Newtonian or Modernist view of the world described earlier in this chapter where global society is structured and ordered and where conflict and difference are seen as obstacles to be suppressed, controlled, or managed.
Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1986) on dialogue and the conceptualisation of language as a site of struggle, Schneider and von der Emde (2006) argue that it is more important to help students feel comfortable with conflict than to encourage them to deny their own cultural approaches to disagreement or rush to find common ground, for almost inevitably it is the dominant culture which establishes what ground is common. They propose a dialogic approach as this type of approach posits conflict not only as an inherent feature of intercultural exchange, but also as a value. Dialogue allows for the existence of differences without trying to overcome or ‘tame’ them. Schneider and von der Emde’s (2006) conceptualisation of online intercultural education as a ‘site for struggle’ has much in common with Ortega and Zyzik’s (2008) emphasis on the need to conceptualise computer mediated interactions as “complex and contested sites for intercultural negotiation and reconstruction” rather than as “inherently productive moments for bringing about intercultural understanding” (p. 338).

Here again, the literature on identity and language learning is potentially relevant, in particular the notion of investment which presupposes that as learners interact

> “they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space” (Norton, 2000/2013, p. 51).

### 1.4. Why explore identity in virtual exchange?

Identity can be seen as a key construct to successful learning because it links the learner to the social world, both inside and outside of the classroom. By focussing on the fluidity and co-construction of identity in interactions, we can
move away from static and monolithic representations of culture and essentialist understandings of the intercultural (Dervin, 2015). Identities can be empowering and disempowering, they can be assumed and they can be challenged. Opportunities for ‘identity work’ can be created by educators both within the classroom and also beyond. Through the use of online technologies for virtual exchange, students can be offered opportunities for identity construction and negotiation through authentic interaction with geographically distant peers.

This book is aimed at educators and graduate students interested in learning more about virtual exchange and exploring the kind of interactions that can take place in online facilitated dialogue. It is also of potential relevance to scholars of identity, intercultural learning, global education, foreign language teaching, and technology in education. It is based on a study which consisted in the development and application of a theoretical framework for the study of identity as it emerges in interaction in a specific virtual exchange context. The original study consisted in the transcription and micro-analytical analysis of the multimodal communication from three two-hour online dialogue sessions from one group of young people from Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Tunisia, and the United States who participated in the Soliya Connect Program in 2011\(^\text{13}\). In this book, I spare readers the arduous task of reading through pages and pages of dense transcripts and analyses. I instead present the theoretical framework for exploring identity as it emerges in interaction and draw on some of the data and analyses from my study in order to illustrate how facilitator and participant identities emerged and were negotiated in this online situated context.

The first part of the book presents the theoretical framework and research approach adopted for the exploration of identity in this virtual exchange context. I first of all provide a brief overview (Chapter 2) of how language and identity have been conceptualised in foreign language education and in some online spaces. I then present the theoretical framework (Chapter 3), which is grounded in poststructuralist views of identity as social action and is specifically targeted at the study of identity in online interactions. It builds on

\(^{13}\) My full PhD study is available online at https://www.educacion.gob.es/teseo/mostrarRef.do?ref=1351668.
five key principles. These regard the **situatedness** of interaction and identity work; the **mediation** of technology in online interactions and identity work; and then three principles drawn from the work of Bucholtz and Hall (2005), **positionality**, **indexicality**, and **relationality**. In Chapter 4, I explain the rationale behind combining an interaction based approach broadly informed by conversation analysis with ethnography for an emic understanding of the interactional data. I then provide a description of the online context in which this study was based, the Soliya Connect Program, and explain my different positionings within it.

The second part of the book illustrates the application of the theoretical framework. All identity work takes place in situated contexts that shape – but do not determine – the identity positionings of the participants interacting in them. In Chapter 5, I begin with the ‘situatedness principle’ as I explore Soliya as an ‘epistechnical system’ (Williamson, 2013) in order to understand the factors that might have influenced the design of the Soliya Connect Program and the identities that are made relevant. All interaction and identity work is also mediated, but online interactions have an additional layer of complexity that should not be ignored. In Chapter 6, I look at the design features of the environments and technologies used for the interactions, the affordances and constraints of the different communication modalities available for identity work. I explore two different environments within Soliya, which is not an open social network but a protected, closed space. My starting point is the asynchronous, static, written, and visual modes of the Soliya blog, where participants first engage in identity work as they enter the platform. I then move to the meeting room where the synchronous audio-video dialogue sessions were held. In Chapters 7 and 8, I explore the situated identities of facilitators and participants, how their identities are co-constructed in their interactions in this situated, mediated space through positionality, indexicality and relationality. Shifting identity positionings influence interaction patterns as they can alter the power dynamics and have an impact on participants’ investment in the dialogue process.

The aim of the book is not to provide a solution to the critical issues I have identified in the telecollaboration literature, nor is it intended to be a manual
on virtual exchange or online facilitation. As virtual exchange is becoming an increasingly common educational approach\textsuperscript{14}, the intention of this book is to propose ways for exploring identities as they emerge in online interactions. The research-informed theoretical content of this work also has an applied focus in that better understanding the processes of identity formation in virtual exchange can lead to creating more effective uses of this educational practice.

\textsuperscript{14} In 2018 the European Commission launched the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project, for example, aiming to offer experience of virtual exchange to 25,000 young people by the end of 2019;\url{http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-1741_en.htm}