

# 12 Recognising participation in virtual exchange: open badges and the CLAVIER contribution

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## Abstract

The CLAVIER (Connected Learning And Virtual Intercultural Exchange Research) network grew rhizomatically as a result of open practice (Blyth, 2019), which is central to the CLAVIER approach. Informed by the field of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), the network has provided a safe space to experiment with the development and implementation of open badges to support sustained participation in Virtual Exchanges (VEs). This case study describes the rationale for CLAVIER's open badge framework and its links with the Erasmus+ VE (E+VE) badges.

**Keywords:** virtual exchange, open badges, micro-credentials, telecollaboration, computer-mediated communication.

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## 1. Context

The CLAVIER network emerged from a serendipitous person to person connection online in 2011 and has developed into a large scale VE with many ‘threads’ connecting both students and practitioners in discussions, co-creation, and physical exchange. The initial interaction followed by connections made on the social media platform Twitter resulted in a decision to connect the classrooms of language learners in Warwick, UK, and Clermont Ferrand, France, through computer-mediated activities (MacKinnon, 2016). CLAVIER has at its hub a core group of founding partners working in higher education institutions in the UK, France, and Poland. The students are undergraduates and postgraduates from a range of disciplines, wishing to enhance their language proficiency for diverse academic, professional, or personal reasons. They include specialist graduate students from Poland who are preparing to teach languages. In this chapter we will explain how the piloting and implementation of open badges in CLAVIER was connected to their use in E+VE.

The guiding principles of the exchanges were that:

- interactions would be computer-mediated;
- the tutor’s role would be light, supportive, a ‘more knowledgeable other’.

The resulting VE activities crossed the boundaries between formal and informal learning (Ensor, Kleban, & Rodrigues, 2017). Key elements contributing to the rhizomatic growth of this network include the openness (Blyth, 2019) central to the CLAVIER approach. Students and staff work together to design tasks and sequences of tasks appropriate to the learner context that provide progression in both language and CMC skills. Many tasks require the use of open channels such as social media sites.

Over time, due in no small part to the Open Educational Practice (OEP) of the lead practitioners, CLAVIER grew into a wider network of practitioners

interested in the potential of CMC for international professional development. OEP, as described by Cronin (2017) is “complex, personal, and contextual; it is also continually negotiated” (p. 1). The use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google coupled with hashtags (e.g. #warcler #clerwar) to aggregate conversations and amplify activities to a wider audience helped to support this growth. Physical exchanges supported by E+ teaching staff mobility funding have enabled the founding practitioners to better understand their respective contexts, and to facilitate the development of both online and offline activities.

Staff and student visits have strengthened the network. Engaging in the normalisation of such open practices has contributed in unexpected ways to the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of the practitioners concerned and resonates with the findings of Daniels (2019), “contributing in nuanced ways to participants’ CPD in terms of skills development, knowledge building, and language literacy. This seems to be occurring through individual and social practices” (p. 168).

## **2. Aims and description of CLAVIER**

CLAVIER practitioners, mainly language educators, share a network of contacts and classes. They define the terms of their own class’s VE collaboratively with suitable partner class/es whilst collaborating through the CLAVIER network. This means that each practitioner can benefit from a range of shared ideas yet still tailor tasks, tools, and assessments to best suit their context. This balance of infrastructure (shared tools such as Google Drive and communal spaces including an official Facebook page) and flexibility in terms of timing and task design allows individuals to participate in their own way, increasing their agency. We know that the attitude of practitioners towards any given learning intervention is crucial to student engagement (Guichon & Hauck, 2011). CLAVIER’s approach is one of a collective (Thomas & Seeley-Brown, 2011) whereby strength results from participation, forming a virtuous circle for both staff and students. The network provides informal

CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) preparation for practitioners who feel they have not been well prepared for the use of technology in their teaching by formal qualifications (Kessler, 2007, p. 179).

The significance of recognition of participation was acknowledged early on in CLAVIER. In 2015, CLAVIER began to issue open badges in order to valorise the work of students, having investigated badge use as signifiers of participation (Hauck & MacKinnon, 2016). Open badges contributed to the infrastructure supporting the objectives of our collective.

### **3. Nuts and bolts of badges in CLAVIER**

Open badges are online representations of skills, interests, and achievements which are verified through credible organisations. The system is based on an open standard and earners can display multiple badges from different issuers to tell the complete story of their achievements – both online and off. Badges can be displayed wherever earners want them on the web, and share them for employment, education, or lifelong learning (adapted from the badge wiki [https://badge.wiki/wiki/What\\_Are\\_Open\\_Badges%3F#cite\\_note-1](https://badge.wiki/wiki/What_Are_Open_Badges%3F#cite_note-1)).

Badge design requires identification of the key learning moments along the route to more significant skill development (Hauck & MacKinnon, 2016).

Badges can be awarded through a push mechanism, which is to say that those who have earned a badge will receive an email via the platform confirming that they have met the criteria for issue. When a badge platform is integrated within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) it is possible to set such issuing events remotely so that the criteria, once recognised as met by the VLE, result in the automated issue of badges. It is also possible to set up a ‘pull’ mechanism for badge issuing whereby the badge earner has to provide evidence through the platform, for example through the submission of a link to a recording, file, or e-portfolio. The issuing event takes place via email notification when the

evidence is accepted by an authorised user such as the lead tutor. CLAVIER has used both approaches.

The founders of the CLAVIER exchange had been investigating badges for some years. In 2014 we set up a CLAVIER connector badge on the badge list platform and claimed the badge for ourselves using evidence of our activity in the CLAVIER community. This experiment helped us to understand the importance of using a badge as a signifier of community. Providing evidence of one's activity online in order to claim a badge can be a powerful way to learn how to manage one's online presence.


Subsequently CLAVIER began to award badges to students as recognition for participation in different activities, for example an engagement badge for sharing information and participating in conversations in certain communities (see [Table 1](#)).

As one of the VEs described in O'Dowd and Lewis's (2016) collection on Online Intercultural Exchange, CLAVIER was pleased to support the E+VE initiative when it started in 2018. We agreed to align the CLAVIER VEs to the goals of the E+VE initiative so they could be classed as TEPs (Transnational Exchange Projects). In other words, CLAVIER leaders completed training and decided to 'TEPify' CLAVIER's core VEs. This involved the following steps:

- ensuring that all students registered with E+VE, completing a pre-VE survey, giving consent for research into their experience;
- recording student participation in set VE tasks;
- encouraging student participation in online facilitated dialogue sessions, offering a further experience of a different form of VE; and
- signing a memorandum of understanding between participating partner institutions.

Participating in the initiative meant that students of our TEPs could earn an E+VE participant badge. We recognise this as a valuable way for students to communicate their experience. The E+VE badge has a wider significance than the CLAVIER badges because the graphics after 2019 carry the European flag, and the metadata in the badge links to a competences framework<sup>5</sup>. This relationship between our CLAVIER initiative and the E+VE development helped to underline the importance of VE activity to our institutions, offering the endorsement of a transnational body, the European Commission. CLAVIER badges continued to provide recognition of the steps at micro-level needed to participate in CLAVIER VEs, with the E+VE TEP Participant badge offering student recognition of an extended commitment and a possible pathway to further engagement in the wider European initiative.

Table 1. Examples of badges from Clavier and E+VE

Badge Graphics Examples from CLAVIER and E+VE	Criteria
	<p><b>YOU'RE HIRED!</b></p> <p>Students have to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• select an advert for a job or an internship, and write a CV and a cover letter;</li> <li>• make contact with their partner, access their material, and negotiate an online meeting to interview each other through videoconferencing (e.g. Zoom) for the job they are applying for; and</li> <li>• submit a reflection on this process.</li> </ul> <p>In order to be awarded this badge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document your interaction through CLAVIER with recordings/screenshots and submit with your reflection.</li> </ul>

5. [https://badge.wiki/wiki/What\\_Are\\_Open\\_Badges%3F#cite\\_note-1](https://badge.wiki/wiki/What_Are_Open_Badges%3F#cite_note-1), [https://europa.eu/youth/node/69178\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/node/69178_en)

	<p><b>OIE5</b></p> <p>Engagement badge</p> <p>You have shared information with the Echange Warwick Clermont community<sup>6</sup> and participated in a conversation about how you engage in a community in order to improve the lives of others.</p> <p>#CMC, #OIE</p> <p>You need to provide screenshots or links to show that you have created a post to the EWC Engagement filter and a reply to at least two other posts on the same filter.</p>
	<p><b>TEP PARTICIPANT</b></p> <p>E+VE is a ground-breaking project enabling youth in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to engage in meaningful intercultural experiences online, as part of their formal or non-formal education.</p> <p>Awarded for participation in a VE organised by TEP trained practitioner/s.</p> <p>Participation in this activity builds competencies<sup>7</sup> in: digital competence A, intercultural competence A, transversal skills A; plurilingualism A, cooperation skills A, empathy and sensitivity A, knowledge and critical understanding of self in the world A, and tolerance of ambiguity A.</p> <p>See E+VE competency framework for details: <a href="https://europa.eu/youth/node/69178_en">https://europa.eu/youth/node/69178_en</a></p> <p>The owner of this badge has taken part in a TEP. The project was designed and implemented by a trained TEP coordinator. The awardee has completed the required assessments. The TEP lasted a minimum of four weeks and comprised both asynchronous and synchronous online communication and collaboration with transnational peers.</p>

6. Name of a google plus community created for interaction.

7. E+ Competences Framework [https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/erasmus-virtual-exchange-competences-framework\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/erasmus-virtual-exchange-competences-framework_en)

## 4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

Central to the assessment in CLAVIER is the use of web-based tools such as e-portfolios and blogs according to the course requirements locally. At the University of Warwick, this has included the use of an e-portfolio tool (Mahara) integrated within the VLE. In Clermont, the students use a Google Drive to collect and share their activities with their tutors. In Krakow, students are encouraged to blog their experiences publically. The requirement to collect, curate, and reflect upon their participation in VEs can contribute to the course assessment which in turn encourages student engagement.

The use of badges as visual signifiers provides a way of connecting VE participants and practitioners online. Once awarded, badges can be incorporated into an individual's online presence. Open badge passports provide a mechanism for continued engagement with VE activities. In CLAVIER, we are keen to show students that learning is not just about achieving recognition from one institution, as valuable as that may be. We aim to engage our students in a lifelong process of learning, helping them to appreciate the importance of self-directed learning in shaping their development. Our practitioners bear witness to the transformational effects of engagement with VE on their own practice as evidenced in our retelling of our lived experience (MacKinnon, 2019).

However, this shift from students as consumers of assessment to students as owners of their own progress requires a different mindset. Clearly, as open badges are relatively new to most students, there is a process of acceptance reliant on clear communication from tutors. There is critical alignment between participants' growing confidence in the virtual domain and earning a badge in recognition of that expertise. This process encourages the badge owner to take an active role in curating and declaring their expertise and can potentially provide possibilities for discovering new paths of study and extending networks. Students are encouraged to open their own open badge passport account to manage and display their badges. This approach has also



been adopted in E+VE. The challenges experienced within CLAVIER have been replicated in the wider E+VE context that involves multiple delivery partners working as a consortium. These challenges are explained in the following section.

## 5. Lessons learnt and conclusion

Several challenging themes emerge from experiences of CLAVIER (Ensor et al., 2017) and they have much in common with those found by others working in this area. As noted in their editorial referring to the article by Ensor et al. (2017), Potolia and Stratilaki (2017) point to the complexity of telecollaborative practice: “[i]t is precisely this difficulty that leads the authors to stress the importance of telecollaboration as a means to bring about a profound transformation of education in order to prepare for the education of tomorrow” (n.p.). The CLAVIER challenges include:

- the importance of flexibility and dynamic adjustments during VEs;
- the challenge of establishing sustained engagement without compulsion;
- the unexpected developments and connections arising from the growing network; and
- the transformational nature of persisting with VE on the lives and work of the practitioners.

### 5.1. Lessons from issuing badges

Over time, the tools used for CLAVIER VEs have changed and the technical infrastructure has been impacted by decisions that were beyond the influence of the practitioners. Our willingness to work in the open online through OEP has meant that we have been able to continue despite this. The practitioners

have built a shared understanding of the importance of putting the learning experience at the heart of the VE. The technology is a mediator but it does not dictate what can be achieved. The badge design and implementation process has required fundamental engagement with the detail of the intended learning as part of task design. Tasks can progress from information exchange, comparison, and analysis to collaborative co-creation, and this framework<sup>8</sup> for badging supports the task design.

As revealed in the badge investigations into CLAVIER (Hauck & MacKinnon, 2016), there is a tension between the necessary bureaucracy of badge award (verification of evidence for example) and the positive effects of the immediacy of badge award. To some extent the integration of a badge platform within a shared VLE can help to address this as the VLE offers automation of the award process based around completion of given criteria such as assignment submission or grade thresholds. The process of reviewing student engagement with the VE, quantified by the badge collection, is a constant feedback loop enabling practitioners to critically appraise their interventions.

## **5.2. Lessons from collecting badges**

Using open badges in CLAVIER and engaging in OEP has enabled us as practitioners to overcome some of the challenges of VE. We have worked as a team to deal with the need for dynamic change over time. The badges are visual motivational tools which, when explained clearly to students, can produce further opportunities and routes to their development. When collecting their open badges, students also have to face decisions around their open practice. They have to decide which badges to share, where, and how to share them. Those decisions will be complex, personal, and contextual. They have to build their own digital resilience.

The shift from student as assessee to student as curator of their learning is an important one in a challenging job market where new roles are emerging.

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8. <https://www.justframeworks.com/#!/frameworks/53db2e9a-0bf4-e411-8f25-d067e5ec4c65>

Students sometimes have to hunt for the badge award email that may be filtered by their email programme. They have to engage with their digital professional identity. In so doing they can significantly increase their understanding of the digital environment which increasingly dominates their lives.

VE is not well understood within the formal learning framework of higher education. Institutional use of technology tends to focus on provision for registered students and rarely offers the flexibility of a space which can be shared across institutions and beyond into informal learning settings. As such, VE is a hybrid activity but one based upon the importance of interconnection in a world where we are ever more interdependent. The socio-political context of higher education institutions demands market driven competition between institutions as they jostle for higher places in the rankings in order to attract ever more students. This pressure runs counter to the focus on collaborative learning which is at the heart of VE. Using open badges enables practitioners and students to work together to establish what they value, presenting a clear set of identifiers around the activities and interactions which underlie their learning. It reconnects them to the purpose of education. Open badge use provides the means to achieving the sort of paradigm shift referred to by Blyth (2019) in his foreword on openness in and beyond the language classroom.

## 6. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/f2kcaywgw2jclyeqsp02wz5e44io1x41>

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