Review of Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy and practice

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REFERENCES

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1. Introduction
In a recent commentary on open practices in second language teaching and learning (OL2TL), Reinhardt (2016) describes current tensions in higher education thus:

Into the fray come OL2TL supporters, whose well-meaning response to the growing corporate-capitalist educational leviathan is for teachers to take back some of their agency by sharing their practices with others in a space free from exploitation.

Online intercultural exchange (OIE) offers another "space" or collaborative environment with no shortage of dedicated proponents. This is amply demonstrated in O'Dowd and Lewis' recent volume, where problems of alignment between institutional policy and teaching practice in OIE often come to the fore.

Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy and practice, edited by Robert O'Dowd and Tim Lewis, deals with telecollaboration or virtual exchange at university level, including online exchange projects in foreign language education, research findings, pedagogical and technological guidelines, and practitioner case studies. Part of the Routledge series on language and intercultural communication under the direction of Zhu Hua and Claire Kramsch, the book includes three introductory and concluding chapters by the co-editors, and 14 chapters from 16 contributors both in Europe (UK, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Spain) and beyond (US, Canada, Australia, and Brazil).

Like the majority of such collections, the book has a common index but references are specific to each chapter; unsurprisingly the most cited authors are Robert O'Dowd and Steve Thorne, two key figures in intercultural aspects of computer mediated communication (CMC). Also frequently referenced are Belz, Byram, Kinginger, Kramsch, Müller-Hartmann, and Warschauer; I include a key reference for each in the reference section below. The main keywords include communication, competence(cies), exchange, learning, skills, software, and task, suggesting a general focus on pedagogy and technology which is borne out by the chapters themselves.

The book is organised in five sections. Part 1 offers an overview of the book and comprises two chapters each co-authored by the volume editors. Parts 2 through 4 each include four or five chapters, respectively on University Education, Pedagogy, and Practice, while Part 5 constitutes the volume's conclusion, where O'Dowd addresses the 2013 EuroCALL conference theme "learning from past and looking to the future" of OIE.

The editors are long-term OIE practitioners, coordinators, and researchers, both key players in several European projects in this area. The EU lifelong learning project INTENT (INtegrating TELEcollaborative NeTworks into foreign language higher education) produced the UNIcollaboration platform where teachers can find both partners and pedagogical resources for OIE. The success of this project has led to the creation of the UNIcollaboration organisation to support further work in OIE, as well as a follow-up
In the first chapter, the volume editors define their field of interest, covering terminology, rationale, origins, and types of OIE. They set out a manifesto in the form of the following five claims:

1. telecollaboration can make an important contribution to foreign language learning, intercultural competence, and international education policy;
2. it is an extremely complex activity which is both time-consuming and challenging for teachers and for students;
3. it should form part of the common battery of educational tools used by university educators across disciplines;
4. long-term success depends on support by university management and policy makers; and
5. practitioners and researchers should contribute transparent research into the educational value of telecollaboration and develop models of telecollaborative exchange.

The second chapter offers a review of OIE and foreign language learning (FLL) which covers 25 years of research in the form of empirical, peer-reviewed studies of university level learning outcomes. Fifty-four studies are identified for the period 1999 to 2013, which are reviewed by technology, then by learning goals. Discussion covers language development, intercultural competence (ICC), and learner autonomy, themes which figure large in subsequent chapters. O'Dowd's conclusion in the final section of the book focuses on authenticity, learning, and the effect of the medium on OIE, as well as the risk of what he calls "two-tier student mobility," where OIE becomes the "poor man's" study abroad.

2. Concrete examples and overviews of OIE initiatives

For a reader new to the field, the volume offers an impressive range of both individual OIE projects and meta-analyses or overviews of a wide variety of recent and ongoing virtual exchanges. In the book's Practice section, for example, MacKinnon, Leone and Telles, and Byram provide details of particular initiatives.

The Clavier network (MacKinnon) was established to offer non-language majors at Warwick University in the UK and Clermont-Ferrand in France the opportunity to engage with native speakers of their target languages (French and English respectively). Conducted without central support or indeed constraints, the coordinators have experimented with various tools and tasks and enjoy "a fluidity of identity and agency which is unusual in online teaching contexts" (page 240).

Similarly, a long-running Brazilian initiative, the Teletandem network (Leone & Telles) began as a "non-mandatory learning opportunity" focusing on foreign language education and using free VOIP technology (Skype, Google Hangouts, or Zoom). Mismatches with respect to views on language pedagogy, and difficulties in integrating teletandem courses into regular teacher education programmes are mentioned as challenges for this project. Both authors have published a number of articles analysing data from the project, and plan to extend the programme to secondary school contexts. Efforts in this direction have already been made by Byram and colleagues.
Byram's chapter describes Cultnet, a set of collaborative projects by researchers interested in the cultural and intercultural dimensions of language teaching, especially education for citizenship. An excellent example of groundbreaking OIE initiatives outside traditional institutional structures, the projects here began using guidelines outlined on this group's wiki with the goal of creating transnational partnerships to develop "critical cultural awareness." Byram provides a useful introduction to this notion, glossed as consciousness of the "national basis" of many presuppositions we hold, drawing on Barnett (1997). The author briefly describes one university and one school project, examining both successes and difficulties, and calling for more attention to ways in which "the ideas, but also the practices, can be made more known and applicable" (page 261).

More examples of OIE projects are provided in the Pedagogy section of the book by Nissen in her overview of six blended courses. These were delivered by experienced OIE instructors (two in France, one each in Spain, Italy, Poland and the US), and half focus on the English language. Data comes from short semi-structured interviews, and aside from practical details of course credits and scheduling, the author compares the courses across dimensions such as modes of interaction, activity design, the role of the teacher, student choice, and assessment. The stated aim is to offer examples to "help course designers and teachers develop effective blended learning courses that include OIE" (page 190).

Taken together, these chapters offer a wealth of ideas for setting up OIE projects, from a) identifying students in particular courses and programmes, b) defining learning objectives and designing activities, and c) assessing participants and evaluating courses, to d) questions of institutional embedding, and e) communicating results. More on assessing the effectiveness of OIE is provided in the following section.

3. Tools and heuristics for evaluating OIE

Readers with some background in OIE may be particularly interested in three chapters which tackle issues of OIE evaluation from the perspectives of learners, teachers, and OIE coordinators respectively. Hauck and MacKinnon discuss the use of badges as a form of "soft certification" or "gamification" suitable for OIE, and report on trials with learners in the Clavier project discussed earlier.

Dooly presents a framework developed during the INTENT project to describe and assess telecollaborative competence in both learners and their teachers. It covers knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the four competences: online, social, technical, and intercultural, and the full table of descriptors is accessible as an ePortfolio on the INTENT website. Dooly's chapter provides theoretical background to the framework, touching on CMC research, intercultural competence, and L2 pragmatics (Kasper & Rose, 2002). She goes on to describe a sample OIE course for future language teachers which included a peer feedback component allowing reflection on what Dooly calls "third-space sociopragmatic failure." The author argues that such experiences allow teachers to "see how they could emulate and reconstruct (at least hypothetically) fruitful OIE learning environments in their future teaching" (page 203).

Moving on to more general evaluation of OIE effectiveness, Guth's chapter reports on a survey of OIE practice in Europe, again conducted as part of INTENT. The team developed a questionnaire for practitioners and students to describe opportunities and experiences with telecollaboration. They used the Delphi method to revise and test items, then
convenience sampling to distribute the instrument in four languages, obtaining nearly 350 responses from educators and students. Although the respondents with OIE experience were mostly language teachers, they reported goals of developing intercultural awareness (75%) and learning to communicate online (63%) rather than language learning (54%). Teachers without OIE experience rated language learning higher (91%, versus 90% for intercultural awareness, though no statistical testing is reported). The majority of reported exchanges used English, as might be expected, though half were lingua franca rather than L1/L2 tandems. The some 100 educators who had conducted OIE appeared to be "outliers" involved in "bottom-up initiatives," since few had institutional support or encouragement of any kind (academic credit, technical support, training, or links to international programmes). The student respondents were generally positive and felt they improved their language skills, though they were divided on their perceptions of intercultural learning and also found projects time-consuming, often disproportionately to the academic benefits accrued.

The team supplemented this quantitative data with seven case studies, two focusing on learning French, and the others combining FL with other disciplines (business, engineering). The chapter reports some institutional recognition of these OIE initiatives: students received credit in some modules, and some universities extended and formalised exchange agreements. Guth goes on to offer practical recommendations for OIE, stressing the need for institutional support towards an objective of OIE "normalisation" (Bax, 2003). She argues that OIE can guarantee what she sees as much-needed improvements in intercultural understanding, in ways that physical mobility cannot.

4. Institutional concerns

Perhaps somewhat further from the core interests of Alsic readers, O'Dowd and Lewis' collection also includes a number of writers whose main concern is the institutional framework in which OIE operates. This reader found their chapters both interesting and informative, shedding light on reasons for many OIE difficulties and showing these to be common to a range of higher education contexts. De Wit's chapter on the role of OIE in internationalisation is a case in point, and makes a number of valuable points about the international dimensions of education in Europe and across the world. He offers a historical overview of scholarly exchange dating from medieval times to the present day, emphasising the influence of twentieth century exchange programmes such as Fulbright and Erasmus, as well as stressing the detrimental effects of the 1981 introduction of tuition fees for international students in the UK by the Thatcher government.

De Wit makes the useful distinction between internationalisation "at home" and "abroad," reminding readers that internationalisation can also take the form of local curricula to develop international understanding and intercultural skills, as well as the more familiar, outward-looking mobility of students and academics. Although European policy set a mobility target of 20% of students and staff by 2020, de Wit notes that for most of the 49 signatories of the Bologna Declaration (1999), the current rate is less than 10%, and the same is true of the US. However, even if this target were to be attained, the vast majority of students and academics still do not travel abroad, and so alternative approaches to the question remain relevant. De Wit sees OIE as a key part of "internationalisation at home" and perhaps a more pedagogically desirable alternative to
MOOCs. He calls for the transformation of OIE from "the hobby of individual teachers" to "strategic innovations" for internationalising curricula in higher education.

Wilson's contribution offers a satisfying complement to De Wit's chapter with a succinct summary of the Bologna process, which she views as "a top-down approach to institutional policy development which has been influenced heavily by the economic landscape and strategic directives of European with the global economy." She goes on to describe two case studies which highlight very practical difficulties with respect to matching classes in terms of numbers of students and semester dates: exchanges are obviously easier to coordinate when student numbers and timetables correspond closely. In the first example, Wilson shows how the Bologna process affected an Irish-US exchange first negatively, by forcing the Irish coordinator-instructor to reduce participant numbers by actively dissuading students from joining the project, then positively, by recognising his work with a teaching excellence award. The second example shows how different semester dates limited the time available for a US-Belarussian exchange to only six weeks, capping the number of credits that could be offered, and changing the status of course in the Belarussian programme. This change negatively impacted student motivation and their participation in the exchange. To address such difficulties, Wilson calls for "a more detailed approach towards alignment of institutional policies" on the part of university administration (page 105), in line with Guth's findings noted above.

Two other contributions examine OIE in Australia and at the State University of New York (SUNY) respectively. Like Wilson, Tudini focuses on practical challenges in OIE: limited language teaching in the Australian education system, geographic factors including a different academic calendar, the cost of air travel as an obstacle to physical mobility for Australian students, and time zone differences in synchronous exchanges. Her overview of six studies includes research published in *Language Learning and Technology* and *CALL* journals at Australian universities on languages other than English (French, Italian, Japanese) from 2002 to 2011. Due to the constraints just noted, the studies all involve "independent, out-of-class interaction in a variety of technological-interactional configurations" (page 124). Van der Zwaard's (2017) dissertation offers an interesting counterpoint here, addressing as it does synchronous CMC between Australian and Dutch students. Interestingly, this study also tackles Reinhardt's (2016) divide between corporate and open practices in higher education, which van der Zwaard frames as "the monastery and market place dilemma" (page 17).

Finally, Rubin presents SUNY's Collaborative Online International Learning centre (COIL) which he founded in 2006 and continues to direct with the goal of promoting collaborative learning across two or more countries. The centre supports teachers in three collaborative formats from introductory meetups, through longer engagements, to full semester courses. This chapter outlines the institutional framework and curricular organisation, then addresses challenges and outcomes: "every day is filled with new challenges for the COIL centre" (page 269). A main issue for Rubin is lack of serious institutional engagement on both sides of exchanges, what he sees as "too much parallel play (...) without enough sharing" (page 270).
5. Pedagogy and learning

In the final section of this analysis I turn to the chapters which are perhaps of greatest relevance to the Alsic readership and were of most interest to me as a language teacher, teacher educator, and CALL researcher. These contributions focus on pedagogical dimensions and the learning potential of OIE, from both FLL and ICC perspectives.

Furstenberg reports on one of the first OIE initiatives, the Cultura project launched in 1997, which brought together "two classes of students enrolled in language classes in France and in the United States, who would analyse and compare a variety of materials" and thus gain access to "an authentic insider's view" of the other culture (page 250). All pedagogical materials and tasks are carefully prepared to maximise learner engagement with both the detail of the texts and their wider cultural implications. The main tool for interaction is asynchronous forum discussion, and face-to-face class sessions on each side allow focus on aspects of language as well as cultural learning. Interestingly, in spite of the success of the project for the US partner and its "exceptional" evaluation by OIE experts (Levy, 2007), the author still reports difficulties in finding "the right partner class," due, she suggests, to differences in the status of the course and in student motivations on each side of the Atlantic.

Helm’s chapter focuses on the Soliya Connect Programme which is unusual in several ways: it is run by an NGO (non-governmental organization), rather than a university; it focuses specifically on intercultural dialogue across Western and Arab/Muslim participants; and it uses synchronous videoconference for groups of ten or twelve participants formed from cohorts of some 300-450 per iteration of the course. The paper emphasises the importance of task sequencing, moving from simple to more face-threatening topics, and relying on facilitators to create a safe, friendly space, support understanding, and promote interaction and dialogue. Helm shows how the facilitators' efforts to nominate speakers, reformulate questions or comments, or perhaps provide a text version of an oral contribution all help to support exchanges which might otherwise have faltered or halted at uncomfortable junctures. The author's transcriptions and discussion include, for example, an episode characterised by a series of pauses of 10 to over 30 seconds after an American participant asks a Palestinian "what actions rather than feelings would dictate your interpretation of Israelis as criminals?" (reproduced here without original hesitation markers).

Incidentally the prompt for this interaction was a word association task adapted from earlier projects like Cultura, with a clever twist to avoid participants influencing one another: everyone types the word they associate with "Israel" into the chat window, but only press send at the facilitator's signal so responses appear more or less simultaneously. In her chapter Furstenberg notes how frequently the Cultura questionnaire prompts have been reused in subsequent projects, and Helm's analysis shows how an idea conceived as a simple ice-breaker in one context can stimulate much deeper engagement in another.

Last but not least, Müller-Hartmann and Kurek report on a teacher education exchange between German and Polish EFL teachers using the OIE format of intercultural group collaboration to create pedagogical materials. The paper also draws on Byram's intercultural competence (2008), particularly Kramsch's (2006) notion of symbolic competence, that is, the ability "to interpret intentions behind the message" (Müller-
The study allows triangulation through multiple perspectives on the data collected, including student interaction during tasks as well as post-task individual portfolios, for example. The authors used an activity theory framework to code data and then focus on critical learning incidents.

A fine-grained analysis of interactions within one group of four students over a series of tasks shows the influence of workload distribution, personal style, cultural profile and understanding of intercultural competence on the quality of both the process and products of collaboration. The authors show how one somewhat dominant student was able to "wriggle out" of the targeted ICC object and fall back on his subjective, culturally determined theories of language and cultural learning (page 145). The group selected for analysis functioned relatively successfully, though it included one disengaged participant who made little contribution to the tasks assigned. An interesting comparison is Belz (2003) where the focus was instead on a dysfunctional intercultural group where one participant also withdrew from interaction. His reasons are of course by definition difficult to ascertain, and this remains a challenge for any OIE initiative if claims about effectiveness of FLL and ICC gains are to be substantiated.

6. Conclusion

This timely volume raises a number of interesting issues with respect to the teaching and learning of languages with technology. Returning to the manifesto announced in the book's introduction, it seems fair to claim that this volume clearly demonstrates the second and fourth of the authors' claims: OIE is certainly complex and challenging, and its long-term success ultimately depends on policy. The authors also suggest OIE can make "an important contribution" to FLL and ICC, and should be normalised across disciplines. Here I feel their case is not so strongly defended, at least as far as can be judged from the current collection of articles. Their final claim is that more OIE research is required, and it seems reasonable that further studies would help address the issue of its effectiveness for FLL, ICC and other disciplines. Not all the chapters in the present volume do actually engage with this question. Three further points raised by various authors in the book also deserve mention.

First, the utility of investigating various types of communicative failure in terms of learning opportunities for OIE learners, teachers, and coordinators is addressed by a number of contributors (Dooly, Helm, Müller-Hartmann and Kurek, Wilson). Dooly and Helm show how students can learn from critical incidents of communicative difficulty or breakdown during particular OIE projects, while Müller-Hartmann and Kurek suggest how teacher educators can also learn from close analysis of such incidents. It remains to be determined how future OIE projects can benefit from such insights: Belz (2003) includes an interesting discussion of how to tackle the miscommunication detailed in her study, but more than a decade on, Byram (this volume) notes that transfer of learning from OIE experiences remains an important challenge.

The question of physical versus virtual mobility is another recurring question (De Wit, Guth, O'Dowd, O'Dowd & Lewis, Wilson), as is the related issue of face-to-face, distance or blended formats (Nissen). In this context, a recent experiment which combines blended learning with both virtual and physical mobility is worth noting. The SPIRAL project trains novice primary teachers in FLL and ICC using a combination of short international placements via local face-to-face sessions, telecollaborative exchanges with school
partners, and ePortfolio assignments to be completed during and after physical mobility. Such initiatives may offer a middle ground between actual and virtual exchange, and thus go some way to addressing O’Dowd’s concerns about a two-tier system favouring students in more comfortable educational situations.

33 A third dimension highlighted in O’Dowd and Lewis’ collection concerns tensions between freedom to experiment and institutional constraints, again at learner, teacher and OIE coordinator levels. Wilson demonstrates how unfavourable institutional conditions can be turned to advantage by enterprising individual instructors, and indeed the role of solo players or outliers in OIE to date is frequently emphasised (Furstenberg, Guth, De Wit). Such concerns clearly lie behind current efforts to institutionalise and consolidate OIE through scholarly organisations and journals.

34 The research-practice interface is crucial in this respect. One weak point in current EU policy supporting both languages and technology is the project-oriented character of much funding, which affects both transfer of knowledge and sustainability. In addition, the focus of many projects on "deliverables" and "outputs" no doubt leads project partners to construct reference frameworks and grids of competences. Although these are no doubt helpful in teacher education, they do of necessity strip findings of the kind of thick description and fine-grained analysis which characterise the best chapters in the book, which I found afforded sensitive, insightful, and valuable recommendations for OIE practice and research. Many chapters reported on OIE for teacher education, so we can be hopeful that the coming years will bring more voices to nourish this important debate across monastery and marketplace.

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NOTES

1. A minor gripe with the present volume concerns the referencing, since the index seems to include authors mentioned in running text but not reference lists at the end of each chapter, making it slightly harder to track down specific publications. For the general reader this is unlikely to cause problems.
INDEX

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