



Lucy Kottsieper

Lecturer
Haute École Pédagogique, Vaud
Lausanne, Switzerland



Ruth Benvegnen

Lecturer
Haute École Pédagogique, Vaud
Lausanne, Switzerland

As a young child I used to sit on my grandfather's lap with eyes as large as saucers, while he recounted his adventures in India during the 1930s. In hindsight, these were fabricated, vastly exaggerated stories such as fighting off a streak of tigers single-handedly. However, this exotic fiction would stay with me and when an email plopped into my inbox in April 2019 about a mobility project to a school India, I responded by firing off a one liner to my trusted colleague "Shall we go to India?" (Lucy Kottsieper, HEP Vaud 2019)

Context

The Haute Ecole Pédagogique (HEP), Vaud, Switzerland is a teacher training college that offers Bachelors and Masters degrees to pre-service teachers from primary to secondary level in the state sector. The Northstar School (TNS) in the Gujarat region of India is a relatively new school with small classes ranging from pre to high school. The Bureau de la Mobilité at the HEP instigated a collaborative project between the two and delegated the organisation on the Swiss side to us in July 2019. At the start of the academic year 19-20, the project counted ten pre-service Bachelor and Master students from the HEP and eight in-service teachers, concerned with grades 1 to 8, from TNS, plus trainers from both institutions.



Initial period of virtual collaboration: September to January 2019-20

Swiss and Indian project management met via Skype to discuss the angle of our collaborative venture and to agree each step of the way. We were interested in diverging from standard teaching to focus on the practice of cross-curricular teaching and learning (CCTL). The idea was that each HEP student would partner up with a TNS educator and plan CCTL sequences that would be put into place in TNS over a two-week on-site visit. The project offered 6 ACTS credits to our students and therefore the outcomes needed to be clearly defined. HEP students were expected to complete the project with a planned and practiced 8-11 hour CCTL sequence, keep regular entries in a learning journal and create a 180 second video with their Indian partner on what they had learnt during the project.

Over the autumn semester, ten seminars were held for the Swiss participants. They were fundamental for developing knowledge on cross-curricular teaching, as our students had very little experience of this kind of teaching prior to joining the project. The seminars also focused on developing deeper intercultural competence, easing international collaboration, sharing knowledge of e-tools, developing content for their selected themes of work, sharing ideas for planning and didactics, materials, teaching activities/tasks, and perhaps most importantly, creating good group dynamics.

TNS project members held their own development sessions. Early on in the semester we held a group skype meeting so that all participants could introduce themselves in English. As English was not the first language for most participants, it was important to have the visual exchanges. Introductory videos were supplied by each participant, which were useful for linking names to faces and learning more about each other before arriving on site.

The benefits of using 21st Century e-tools shone through in this project; they were essential as a means for organisation and collaboration. For example we used Moodle as a platform for all internal HEP communication and information, and between TNS and HEP we used Padlet for sharing theoretical knowledge, Google docs for sharing lesson plans,



videos on Google Drive, Skype and WhatsApp for video-talks between Swiss and Indian partners.

It was important for project management on both sides to have pre and post-project information from TNS and HEP participants; they were asked to answer questionnaires about cross-curricular teaching and about their learning throughout the exchange. This offered invaluable insight into students' points of view and were useful when assessing the true added value to such ventures compared to the time and energy invested.

Once the HEP students and TNS educators were paired up and their teaching themes were settled, the first challenge was to start one-to-one discussions and sharing ideas for planning a significant number of hours of collaborative teaching. Inevitably some partners found this easier than others but through gentle nudging, sub-group sharing in some of our seminars, and encouragement from other participants, everybody managed to sketch out some kind of sequence by the time we were scheduled to leave Switzerland.

To develop intercultural competence, we asked our HEP students to complete a questionnaire prior to discussions in small groups, whereupon rich and occasionally heated exchanges ensued. Culture is a strong thread throughout a project such as this, and our students were asked to bring some Swiss culture into the Indian classrooms, as few, if any of the Indian pupils had been to Switzerland or Europe. This proved a hard but rewarding task requiring much thought and planning.

On-site collaboration

We were overwhelmed by a superb welcoming ceremony before being shown around the campus. We began to learn about TNS and its workings. Our students and TNS educators had five three-hour sessions during week one to develop and finalise their teaching sequences. Materials were created and students were able to observe the classes they would co-teach the following week.

As from day four, the cross-curricular sequences were put into action. We were able to observe the classes, film and take photos. Needless to say, the collaboration paid off and pupils, students and educators alike learned and gained from this shared experience.

At the end of week two, the first drafts of students' learning journals were due. This proved to be a wake-up call for some, who had to spend a long night penning in their memories. The final day before departure was devoted to creating 180-second videos with their TNS partners, based on the aforementioned journals. This caused laughter and tears, with some participants feeling it was the biggest challenge of all. However, the results were commendable. Once back home, the students had a week to finalise their reflective learning journals. Post-project questionnaires with compulsory completion were distributed and analysed.

Our own outcome was to keep a daily blog of our adventures. For full details and many photos, see <https://heptns.home.blog>.



Potential challenges

Such a project had the potential for being unbalanced. It was a challenge to find the right amount of sharing between pre-service teachers who had relatively little class-responsible teaching practice behind them, and in-service teachers, some of who had years of experience.

The Indian in-service teachers could have balked at welcoming pre-service teachers into their classrooms. Likewise, our students had to tread the fine line of how to assert themselves into someone else's ways of teaching their class. However, everyone collaborated as best they could for mutual enrichment.

We were also aware of the efforts our hosts were making and wondered if our stay could have been shorter. Two weeks taken out of a busy school curriculum is potentially a lot to ask. If such a project is run in the future, we could possibly shorten it.

Our students were impressed with TNS' 12 habits of mind skills but felt that these were difficult to implement in their own teaching contexts. Likewise, some felt that CCTL would be fairly impossible to integrate into an 'inflexible' Swiss curriculum. However, further discussion reminded our students of how the Vaud education curriculum does include similar objectives that unfortunately get overlooked when 'getting through the syllabus'.

Students were made aware that CCTL can be incorporated into smaller teaching sequences, in subjects such as language, for example. Habits of mind could equally be included in lesson planning. This needed discussing so that the gap between the two education systems seemed narrower.

We as trainers and project managers also needed to be aware of, and treat potential or concrete weaknesses, as we went along, which was a challenge in itself. If we missed something important or did not take the time to discuss something, the learning curve might have been less important for some. This meant constant attention to detail and several discussions with our team.

Opportunities

Opportunities could be gained from all perspectives and in all the phases along the way. All participants involved in the preparation and planning phase could appreciate how vital this was. Open and frequent communication between TNS and HEP participants demonstrated how misunderstandings could be avoided or smoothed over. The advantages and frustrations of international teamwork and collaboration were tackled with varying degrees of enthusiasm and some long-lasting working relationships were formed.

Discovering new teaching approaches in a different context and in a foreign language enhanced our students' - and our own - reflective skills. After some initial surprise at different 'ways of teaching', keeping an open mind definitely led to gaining in objectivity and deeper personal and professional development. TNS pupils gained from having a real reason to display their work and engage with enthusiastic foreign visitors.

Both parties learnt about each other's cultural similarities and differences. There were several 'aha' moments when our students' pre-conceived ideas about India were shown to be quite wrong. Sharing Swiss cultural aspects

also surely opened pupils' and teachers' minds about certain stereotypical notions of Switzerland. The 180-second videos that the teams created at the end of the project, and the learning journals, clearly showed that they all gained in professional and personal maturity.

For us, as teacher trainers and project managers, the professional and personal gains were vast. Getting to know a different education system and being part of this interesting school for two weeks offered us deeper knowledge into how children learn and what motivates (or de-motivates!) teachers and staff. We saw what an excellent private school can offer.

We felt the learners' interest and enthusiasm and experienced first-hand how CCTL can motivate both learners and teachers alike. And perhaps equally importantly, we met India and learnt how a country can enter and take over one's senses and soul. We learnt how a culturally different country, with all its contrasts and conflicts imagined from afar, can carry you away with its smiles and kindness. We also learnt, through reading our students' learning journals that were such an essential part of this project, that at times - possibly through fatigue or lack of time - we had misjudged behaviour or attitudes, that there was a much deeper problem at heart that the person was dealing with and that we, too, needed to remind ourselves to be more micro-interculturally tolerant and open-minded.

Conclusion

Mobility exchanges take all its participants on a considerable learning curve and no one comes away without some kind of personal and professional change. Our students gained a sense of achievement, of having accomplished a cross-curricular sequence in a new context and culture and in a different language. They brushed up their organisational skills, planning and constantly adapting, and most importantly gaining a view of their teaching from the outside in.

Although there are many challenges to such a project, we would never hesitate in undertaking such a venture again. It is a win-win situation. The advantages outweigh the disadvantages by far.

Yes, there are difficult moments, yes, our comfort zones were challenged, yes, we felt the effects of the responsibility of taking ten students to a country that neither of us had ever been to, but the benefits made it all so very worthwhile.

We came home tired but elated; we hadn't fought any tigers but certainly had genuine stories of exotic, impressionable experiences to recount.