

**Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges  
in Higher Education**

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# Virtual Exchanges and Gender-Inclusive Toponymy

## An Intercultural Citizenship Project to Foster Equality

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on a virtual exchange project between the University of Virginia, United States, and an upper-secondary school in Pavia, Italy. Centred on the question of gender equality, the project has been designed to take place over three years (2018-21), and with direct reference to the transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education proposed in 2019 by Robert O’Dowd. As an integrated part of the language learning curriculum, the project creates a virtual space which parallels the space-time of traditional class tuition, and which students can inhabit with a significant degree of autonomy. The project aims to foster gender equality and help students to reflect on the sociocultural evolution of the language and how it can be used to address issues of identity, diversity and inclusion.

**Keywords** Virtual exchange. Intercultural competence. Intercultural citizenship. Global citizenship. Active citizenship. Gender equality.

**Summary** 1 Research Activities in the Background. – 2 The “Language Forward Initiative” Project (Autumn 2018-Spring 2021). – 3 Project Rationale and Outline. – 4 Conclusion.

## 1 Research Activities in the Background

As reinforced in and outside university settings by educators and scholars in foreign language pedagogy, teaching and learning a world language has little to do with technical skills;<sup>1</sup> on the contrary it is a sophisticated art form; researching the way a targeted language evolves and how its evolution influences the sociocultural context and vice versa is an essential step to pass students the appropriate tools to master it. It is crucial to discuss these changes in the classroom, not only to be innovative in the field of foreign language acquisition but also to transmit to students messages of gender equality and social justice that these linguistic variations often bring with them. In other words, language classes give educators the opportunity not only to teach vocabulary, grammar and syntax and engage in everyday conversation but above all to debate with their students on present-day issues in an international setting and help them to become global and active citizens in different areas. The acquisition and implementation of skills of “active citizenship” can be fostered in language classes through “intercultural citizenship” education, introduced by Michael Byram (2008; 2011) and developed, among others, by Robert O’Dowd (2019). Intercultural citizenship is not a matter of teaching and learning in classroom only, it needs to be linked with activity in the world; in language education this approach shows a concern with the social significance of language and its potential with a political/citizenship dimension. As Michel Foucault reminds us, “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and make it possible to thwart” (1978, 100-1); language educators can make a difference and students in these courses can apply what they have learnt to everyday life and other subjects, thus growing as language learners and human beings.

As Francesca Calamita (2018) points out in a recent article on the evolution of Italian language and gender and second language acquisition, in the 1980s and 1990s almost all teachers at schools in Italy were used to say “Buongiorno ragazzi” while greetings their students, employing the masculine form which has been referred for long time as “maschile universale”;<sup>2</sup> today if a teacher wants to pass a message of gender equality while stepping into the classroom, they<sup>3</sup> would say “Buongiorno ragazze e ragazzi”; “ragazze” should also come first, thus

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1 Linking foreign language acquisition and technical skills harms the discipline itself and contributes to devalue PhDs and MAs in the area of language studies.

2 “Maschile universale” refers to masculine nouns and pronouns often used with a generic function, in other words to refer to both women and men.

3 We are using the pronoun “they” to refer to all gender identities.

helping female students to realise that they can be ahead literally and metaphorically of their male counterparts in their future life and career. However, not all teachers are keen about passing such messages of equality for a variety of reasons and they often use the masculine form to refer to a group of students made up of women and men.<sup>4</sup> Some teachers might also argue that they simply apply the traditional grammar rule according to which the masculine form is used to address a group of people where at least one man is present. Furthermore, the issues of pronouns for the LGBTQ community in romance languages still requires much attention also from scholars who actively work towards linguistic gender equality. Moreover, textbooks to teach and learn Italian often give more visibility to male protagonists of history, literature, cinema and arts (almost all - if not all - textbooks to learn Italian mention Dante but how many textbooks give visibility at least to one canonical woman writer, such as Dacia Maraini or Elsa Morante?). The most conservative ones give instructions to complete exercises addressing students as if they are all males, employing “maschile universale”. How do female students feel about it while studying Italian? Is this linguistic and content unbalance one of the reasons for having less enrolments in Italian language classes at university level in comparison with the past? Has the university population changed from the typical wealthy white boy to a diverse and inclusive community who prefers to study subjects from their perspectives (not all males-related, not all white-related, not all heterosexual-related points of view)? Why are teachers not yet trained to pay attention to issues of inclusion and diversity, including language-related debates on linguistic equality? Why have publishing houses not been questioning the content of language textbooks? Why do we maintain this *status quo*? While reflecting on these questions, we should consider that Melissa Bocci in a 2013 article on foreign language acquisition and community-base language learning suggests that “by privileging whiteness, white normativity in service learning can lead to assimilative, discriminatory, and/or exclusionary practices that reinforce oppressive socioeconomic power dynamics” (Bocci 2013, 8). Language in the classroom is not just about words, but about political and cultural messages that have the power to shape students’ future choices in terms of life and career; as educators is part of our job to help students to think critically about the world.

As Michela Menegatti and Monica Rubini suggest in a recent publication:

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<sup>4</sup> The formulas “carissimi”, “gentili professori” and “egregi professori” in emails and other written communication is often used rather than alternative and inclusive options such as “Cari/e tutti/e”, “Carissimi/e” or “Car\* tutt\*”. Recently we received a message from a study abroad programme in Italy addressing us as “Gentilissimi Professori”.

[v]erbal communication is one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetrated and reproduced [...]. The use of expressions consistent with gender stereotypes contributes to transmit and reinforce such belief system and can produce actual discrimination against women. (2017)

Sexism in languages has been addressed by feminist scholars since the late 1960s; in a recent collection of articles on the gendered politics of language, Deborah Cameron (2006), one of the leading voices in the field, suggests that gender and linguistics came together as a university discipline in the 1980s and is currently a major field of research, particularly in Anglophone contexts. Sexism refers to the discriminatory way of representing women with respect to men through the language, and it is evident that sexism is inherent in the Italian language, and other romance languages such as French, Spanish and Portuguese;<sup>5</sup> despite having been less visible, English can be a sexist language and recent changes have also been introduced to make it more inclusive; we are referring, for example, to the use of the pronoun “they” and the word “person” rather than “woman” or “man”, such as in “chairperson” or simply “chair”, rather than “chairman” and “chairwoman”.<sup>6</sup> As teachers committed to pass messages of gender equality to our students, we often find challenges on our paths due not only to the traditional grammar norms that shape the Italian language, but, as already mentioned at the beginning of the article, also to the resistance shown by some educators at university and high school level who are not given the required importance to this issue.<sup>7</sup> Since the publication of Alma Sabatini’s *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (1987), linguistic gender equality has been progressively promoted and sometimes achieved in and outside the Italian academic context, at least in theory while in practice a lot of obsta-

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**5** In Spanish, for example, the @ symbol is widely used in plural nouns referring to a group of people, such as “amig@s” (friends). This is a great solution in written form, yet it might be challenging to pronounce it, as for the case of the Italian use of the asterisk: “car\* tutt\*” (dear all). Therefore, the practice of addressing people with both feminine and masculine forms is the most common: “queridas amigas y queridos amigos” (dear friends). Similarly in French, also the use of parentheses or the middle dot has been implemented: représentés (m.), représentées (f.), représenté·e·s (inclusive), yet using both masculine and feminine forms, such as “toutes et tous”, is the most used formula.

**6** In the 1990s “chairwoman” was not in vogue. “Chairman” was the most used word since positions of power were still often occupied by men.

**7** If students of a target language attend classes with a teacher who would like to promote linguistic gender equality and in the future they will take a course with an instructor who is not willing to question traditional grammar rules, they might feel very confused. Departments should address this issue and collegially work together to promote diversity and inclusion.

cles still need to be overcome.<sup>8</sup> Sabatini illustrates the role language plays in the social contexts and calls for a “non-sexist” use of language, a language that neither privileges men nor perpetuates a series of prejudices against women. If sexist language is at the base of the iceberg to illustrate gendered violence, rethinking its sexist connotation is the first step not only to achieve linguistic gender equality but to contribute to reduce violence against women and the growing number of femicides which are reaching record numbers.<sup>9</sup> The recent publications by Cecilia Robustelli and her engagement with a group of journalists (G.I.U.L.I.A.) has done much for the cause, however many newspapers and TV programmes on major Italian channels are still very adamant about linguistic equality. On social media feminist collectives, such as “Non una di meno” and “Abbatto muri”, and well-known activists and writers, such as Michela Murgia, Michela Marzano and Lorella Zanardo, are constantly passing messages of equality, yet Italian society seems reluctant to progress, particularly through the use of professions in the feminine form, such as “architetta” or “medica” and more generally inclusive language.

How could we help our students to question and fight gender stereotypes? How could we feel comfortable when teaching language courses on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond with stating that the masculine agreement prevails when both sexes are involved?<sup>10</sup> How could we pass a message of gender equality if sexism is part of the Italian language itself? If it is true that some nouns that refer to professions traditionally only performed by men in the past are now widely used in the feminine form, such as “ministra” and “avvocata”, it is still challenging to find textbooks that take this necessary fluctuation of language into consideration.<sup>11</sup> As Calamita suggested in her 2018 arti-

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**8** Since the publication by Sabatini, a few years after the publication of the groundbreaking *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* by American scholar Deborah Cameron, Italian language scholars in the area of sociolinguistics and gender have been debating this subject. Furthermore, in one her latest guidelines, Robustelli talks about the obstacles to achieve linguistic gender equality in administrative language. Despite such efforts, there is still much cultural resistance on this subject. See also Robustelli 2012.

**9** At the end of January 2020, six femicides occurred in Italy in the same week. See [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/01/31/news/103\\_femminicidi\\_nel\\_2019\\_emergenza\\_nazionale-247264904](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/01/31/news/103_femminicidi_nel_2019_emergenza_nazionale-247264904).

**10** The authors of this article have taught Italian in Australia (University of Melbourne - Trapè) and New Zealand (Victoria University of Wellington - Calamita), and USA (University of Virginia - Calamita).

**11** In her language classes, Calamita adopts the guidelines given in *Donne, Grammatica e Media*. An appendix illustrates all the feminine forms of nouns referring to professions; this includes also *medica* and *architetta*. Calamita is currently working on a textbook to teach and learn Italian language with gender equality, inclusion and diversity. *DiversiITALY* (under contract with Kendall Hunt and with colleague Chiara De Santi) should be available for adoption from Fall 2021. Trapè is one of the invited collaborators to this textbook project; the first of this kind in the Italian and North Amer-

cle, it would be surprising to see the word “casalingo” in a textbook, while “casalinga” is usually mentioned several times. It is often a man who is introduced in textbooks to teach the word “direttore” or “ingegnere” and a woman who is portrayed as the stereotypical “mamma italiana” who takes care of all the household duties. Same sex couples are almost non-existent (we never came across the word “lesbica” in a textbook to teach Italian, for example) and the portrayal of the traditional family (heteronormative and with two children) pervades many textbooks teachers use daily, thus suggesting an old – and patriarchal – idea of Italy, often dominated by the Catholic Church and its traditions.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the portrayal of social class and status are often problematic: professions and lifestyle mentioned in textbooks often reflect the upper or middle classes (for example, we never came across an exercise where a factory worker is the protagonist of it). Together with challenging messages on gender, race, sexuality and social class, issues where inclusion and diversity are rarely taken into consideration, students are constantly bombarded with messages of women’s objectification on television and media. What could we do to improve this scenario? How could we help them to learn Italian language without perpetrating gender stereotypes and achieve linguistic gender equality? As Joan Clifford and Deborah S. Reisinger suggest: “As educators [...] it is our responsibility to maintain an atmosphere that does not discriminate, stereotype, tokenize, privilege, or somehow treat students unfairly” (Clifford, Reisinger 2019, 114).

From 2017 Calamita focused on a project in intermediate Italian (ITAL 2020) at the University of Virginia (UVa), namely “A Gendered Wor(l)d: Grammar, Sexism and Cultural Changes in Italian Language and Society”, a multimodal learning experience which allows students to engage critically with Italian media and to become sensitive to the gendered politics of language which she discussed in her 2018 essay.<sup>13</sup> Since then she hoped to open a debate on teaching Ital-

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ican market. The book also aims to address students of Italian in Australia and New Zealand which very often are excluded by the dominant North American and European portrayals in language textbooks.

**12** The idea of Italy as a white and Catholic country is still much in vogue among North American students. If it is true that Italy has, for a long time, been populated by white people and influenced by the Catholic Church, it is also true that many Italians do not attend church regularly, belong to other religions or are simply atheists. In this point in history, when the dangerous message of white supremacy has reappeared on both sides of the Atlantic (see for example the 2018 events happened in Charlottesville, VA where the University of Virginia is located), it is important to send messages of inclusion and diversity in language classes and point out that Italy has been evolving and society has been changing dramatically.

**13** Students engaged in variety of activities which included: discussions and reflections with different means, such as blog posts, class speaking activities, as well as researching on the topic on newspapers and online resources.

ian with linguistic gender equality and to inspire other colleagues to engage in similar projects.<sup>14</sup> The new collaborative project with Roberta Trapè is the continuation of this work, which fosters women's visibility in Italian language and in the social contexts on both sides of the Atlantic.

## 2 The “Language Forward Initiative” Project (Autumn 2018-Spring 2021)

Trapè and Calamita designed a foreign language acquisition project, namely “Language Forward Initiative”, based on a virtual exchange between students studying Italian at University of Virginia (UVa), United States, and students studying English at an Italian upper-secondary school, Liceo Adelaide Cairoli, Pavia.<sup>15</sup> The course design is based on the recommendations made by O’Dowd and Ware (2009), O’Dowd (2017, 2019), Byram et al. (2017), about factors that educators should consider when designing and implementing tasks for virtual exchange and in line with Calamita’s previous project on linguistic gender equality which students of ITAL2020 at the University of Virginia continue to address as part of their assignments.<sup>16</sup> In this project, the intercultural communicative approach, the emphasis on civic action and the promotion of linguistic gender equality have been blended to address issues of inclusion and diversity in the classroom on both sides of the Atlantic.

Carried out over three years (Autumn 2018-Spring 2021), this project consistently blends face-to-face foreign language lessons with Skype-mediated digital learning. As an integrated part of the language learning curriculum, a virtual space has been created which

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**14** *gender/sexuality/Italy*, one of the few journals at the intersections of Italian Studies and Women, Gender and Sexuality dedicated an entire issue in 2016 to the evolution of Italian language and gender. Articles are available online: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/journal/issues/gsi-3-201>. In particular see articles by Ilaria Marotta and Salvatore Monaco, “Un linguaggio più esclusivo. Rischi e asterischi nella lingua italiana” and Michela Baldo, Fabio Corbisiero, and Pietro Maturi, “Ricostruire il genere attraverso il linguaggio: per un uso della lingua (italiana) non sessista e non omotransfobico”.

**15** The project was co-designed by Roberta Trapè (Italian Studies, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne) and Francesca Calamita (Italian Studies, University of Virginia, the coordinator of the research group on the “Language Forward Initiative”, Institute of World Languages). It is supported by a Jefferson Trust Award awarded to the Institute of World Languages, UVa, in Spring 2018. Eleven language programmes, including Italian, are involved, and each programme has designed a unique virtual space in which to develop students’ cultural and linguistic fluency. See Trapè, Calamita 2019.

**16** From Spring 2020, also Hiromi Kaneda, works with her ITAL2020 classes on the gender and language project designed by Calamita.

parallels the space-time of traditional class tuition, and which students can inhabit with a significant degree of autonomy.

In the project's second academic year (Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020) a challenging objective has been the development of virtual exchange focused on intercultural citizenship, which integrates the pillar of intercultural communicative competence from foreign language education with the emphasis on civic action in the community from citizenship education" (Porto 2014, 5).

The essential difference between global competence and global citizenship or intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship lies in the importance attributed to active engagement in society. [...]. So, while intercultural or global competence refer to the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to communicate and act effectively and appropriately in different cultural contexts, global or intercultural citizenship borrow from models of citizenship education to refer to the application of these competences to actively participating in, changing and improving society. (O'Dowd 2019, 17)<sup>17</sup>

O'Dowd used two models of learning of intercultural or global citizenship education to lay the foundations of a transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education (O'Dowd 2019, 15), which engages students with difference and alternative world-views within a pedagogical structure of online collaboration, critical reflection and active contribution to global society (Leask 2015). These two models are *The Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (2018) based on a culture of democracy which refers to values common in Western societies, and Byram's *Framework for Intercultural Citizenship* (Byram 2008, 2011; Wagner, Byram 2017). Byram's intercultural citizenship construct, strictly connected to foreign language learning, has evolved (Wagner, Byram 2017, 1) and this evolution is adopted in O'Dowd's transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education. A key dimension of Byram's new intercultural citizenship construct is "active citizenship" [...] [which implies] being involved in the life of one's community, both local and national" (Wagner, Byram 2017, 3). In this light, intercultural citizenship is instrumental in promoting

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**17** The pagination we use is referred to the article "A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education" uploaded by O'Dowd to <https://unileon.academia.edu/RobertODowd>. The article was published online in the journal *Language Teaching* (Cambridge University Press) in May 2019, where it is presented as a "revised version of a plenary address given at the Sixth International Conference on the Development and Assessment of Intercultural Competence - Intercultural Competence and Mobility: Virtual and Physical. University of Arizona, USA, 25-28 January 2018".



the development of foreign language speaking citizens who are able to act in multilingual and transnational spaces effectively (Wagner, Bryam 2017).<sup>18</sup> In 2019 Byram gave the opening keynote at an international conference on global citizenship;<sup>19</sup> he argued that foreign language teaching can be enriched by reference to citizenship education and related this point to the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* to show how language teaching can become part of an interdisciplinary approach to intercultural dialogue. He focused on the definition of competences as "the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by a given context" (Council of Europe 2018, 1: 32). Although the idea of "democratic culture" is still central, Byram interprets it as connected with that which is human, with a "common core of values", however different in detail, "universal values to live a really human life in dignity and respect", valuing human dignity and human rights, cultural diversity, justice and equality, as in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). This "core of values", he argued, can be taught, not giving answers but asking questions about ethical issues, about our ethical responsibility in the world in a discussion which makes learners reflect on the notion of decentering in order to put themselves in the perspective of the other, to understand the way of thinking of other societies, to find a logic in different perspectives. This encourages learners to go beyond their national perspective, to respect and value diversity, to be aware of our shared humanity and interdependence, and finally to engage and take action. In his new intercultural citizenship construct Byram argues that in the contemporary world language teaching has the responsibility to prepare learners for interaction with people of other cultural backgrounds, teaching them skills and attitudes as well as knowledge. In this perspective, the word "democracy" is expanded, and related to political engagement and participation. "Democracy" is intended as living together more than as a form of government, a

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**18** Wagner and Byram's most recent definition of intercultural citizenship follows: causing/facilitating intercultural citizenship experience, which includes activities of working with others to achieve an agreed end; analysis and reflection on the experience and on the possibility of further social and/or political activity; thereby creating learning that is cognitive, attitudinal, behavioural change in the individual; and a change in self-perception, in relationships with people of different social groups (Wagner, Bryam 2017, 3-4).

**19** Byram was one of the keynote speakers of the international conference *Educating the Global Citizen. International Perspectives on Foreign Language Teaching in the Digital Age* held at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany, 25-28 March 2019, with a paper entitled "Internationalism and Competences for Democratic Culture in Foreign Language Teaching".

mode of associated living, involving citizens to create a better society where everyone participates. As O'Dowd affirms, the model proposed by Byram

understands democracy and political education as the development of “transnational communities” and critical thinkers who engage in social and political activity together to improve their own personal lives and the societies they live in. (O'Dowd 2019, 20)

### Intercultural or global citizenship approaches

involve learners either instigating change in their own societies based on their collaborations with members of other cultures or actually working with members of other cultures as a transnational group in order to take action about an issue or problem which is common to both societies. (O'Dowd 2019, 21)<sup>20</sup>

According to the intercultural citizen approach both groups of students in Charlottesville and Pavia are required to plan and carry out a civic action in their local communities across two semesters;<sup>21</sup> they are encouraged to become global citizens ready to interact effectively in multilingual and international contexts through active citizenship (Wagner, Byram 2017, 3). This is done by taking students past their comfort zone and engaging them in real-world tasks through a project that has direct relevance to their own communities. In this case we have chosen to address the question of gender equality, and the title of the project is: “Gender equality through toponymy. Urban landscape in Charlottesville and Pavia”.<sup>22</sup> As such, the objectives are: learning beyond the classroom walls through virtual exchange, and contact with local organisations (those concerned with gender

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**20** A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education (O'Dowd 2019): it creates opportunities for rich intercultural interaction which can include but is not limited to bicultural/bilingual comparison: it establishes partnerships across a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and using *lingua franca* for communication with these partners; it encourages learners to engage with themes which are of social and political relevance in both partners' societies; it enables students to work with their international partners to undertake action and change in their respective local and global communities; it includes ample opportunities for guided reflection of the intercultural encounters in the classroom; it is integrated and recognised part of course work and institutional academic activity; it increases awareness of how intercultural communication is mediated by online technologies and how social media can shape the creation and interpretation of messages.

**21** While writing the first draft students have just started to work on the second part of the project.

**22** We are gratefully indebted to Debora Ricci (University of Lisbon) who inspired our project with her studies on gender equality and toponymy; we refer in particular to Ricci 2015.

equality and gender-based violence); community engagement and active citizenship; intercultural communicative competence, including linguistic gender equality; working in a transnational team; motivation and engagement (meaningful learning).

### 3 Project Rationale and Outline

In designing the virtual exchange project we referred to the above-mentioned transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education proposed by O'Dowd (2019), which engages students with different and alternative worldviews within a pedagogical structure of online collaboration, critical reflection, and active contribution to global society.

The virtual exchange has been organised between Italian Studies, UVa, and Liceo Adelaide Cairoli, Pavia. Thirty North American students have been partnered with 20 Italian upper-secondary school students to discuss (in dyads or triads) via desktop videoconferencing the contemporary cultural and sociopolitical theme of gender equality. Using the synchronous video communication tool Skype, students meet weekly to speak for 20 minutes in Italian and 20 minutes in English. Each semester includes eight Skype meetings. To begin, students introduced themselves and their school/university to their international partners in North America or Italy in the target language. Pre-virtual exchange activities guided them in the discussions that could then commence: for example, to activate students' prior knowledge of the theme, "ice-breaker" and brainstorming activities centred on gender equality took place in face-to-face lessons.

For the Skype meetings, students choose their favourite day/time within the week. Through e-journals created on the university and school platforms, they regularly share their experience of the virtual exchange with their peers. The Skype meetings and other means of exchange and collaboration increase the students' exposure to spoken Italian/English; foster the development of their speaking, interactional skills, and fluency in the target language; allow them to experience authentic language use, enabling access to meaningful interactions; foster students' active learning, increasing their motivation, agency, and autonomy; cultivate active citizenship.

Study materials have been uploaded to the university and school platforms (Collab for UVa and Google Classroom for Adelaide Cairoli): relevant journal articles and videos on the question of gender equality.<sup>23</sup> Students engage with others through documents and "in

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**23** In Spring 2020 we asked students to read several articles in preparation for the project: these include, but are not limited to, newspapers' articles from *The Guardian*

person”, face-to-face and virtually, to discuss these materials in Italian and English. Discussion involves critical reflection and intercultural interaction on the topic and help students to develop critical thinking in a foreign language acquisition context. With their international partners, students create a transnational group, which closely considers the issue of gender equality in relations to streets’ and relevant places’ names which are rarely named after women on either side. Seeking others’ perspectives and advice, they propose change, and finally act together to instigate change in their local communities (Byram 2008; O’Dowd 2019). The students in fact write down proposals to name a new or unnamed street/place in the students’ respective towns after women who gave a meaningful contribution to the local community, and present them to the respective mayors.

While working on this project students apply real life contexts to education, thus also connecting this project to experiential learning. Experiential learning is the process of learning through experience which enables students to make progress in their chosen subject while reflecting on the knowledge they are acquiring.<sup>24</sup> As far as foreign language acquisition is concerned, experiential learning is a particularly rewarding teaching and learning experience for both students and professors: students are able to see their progress while experiencing full immersion in the targeted language and culture; professors observe them in real-life situations, thus projecting them in their future career and life outside the academic context. In David Kolb’s words, one of the leading scholars of experiential learnings:

[students] must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experience. They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives. They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sounds theories, and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems. (2015, 30)

This is exactly what students also experience with this transatlantic collaboration to foster gender equality.

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and the BBC news: “Are our street names sexist” (BBC, April 2012) and “Next stop... Nina, Simone” (*The Guardian*, June 2018).

**24** Several subcategories fall under the umbrella term “experiential learning”, including “hands-on learning”: a form of experiential learning in which students are not required to reflect on their final achievement yet they are involved in real-life situations wherein they can learn about their subject of choice.

During the Skype meetings, students develop plans to collaboratively create presentations focussed on gender equality within an intercultural framework. These are to be presented (in dyads/triads) within their respective institutions. They also plan a civic action in their respective communities. Students and teachers will discuss the students' presentations and active citizenship in the form of a final group-to-group video conferencing session. The action in the community involves research, reflection, and co-creating a formal proposal. First the students search for places/streets in their own towns that are named after women; they investigate the lives of some of these women. The students have studied articles about the imbalance in main European cities between numbers of streets named after men, and those named after women. Discussion follows (in dyads/triads) on mapping female street names, and on the sociocultural perception of women. In the classroom, students' learning is continuously supported by guided reflections concerning the intercultural encounters and questions made possible by the virtual exchange.

In the project's second phase, the student dyads/triads will seek information about a woman who is not well known, but relevant for the history/life of their town and its community. Each dyad/triad will choose a woman in Pavia and in Charlottesville. Through group-to-group discussion the Italian and North American students will narrow the final selection to two women, one for Charlottesville and one for Pavia. The students will then organise a proposal to name after these women a new or unnamed street/place in their respective towns. The proposals will be written down (through group-to-group virtual collaboration), and presented to the mayors of Pavia and Charlottesville. Students will submit their recommendations to mayors under the guidance of their educators.

With this kind of project we have moved towards intercultural citizenship-focused virtual exchange. The project aims to create virtual spaces where students' social participation and engagement is stimulated and officially valued and virtual exchanges of transnational teams, in an effort to address sociopolitical issues of today's world, and bring them to the fore of teaching foreign languages, to empower students to actively reflect upon their role in a democratic society. Virtual exchanges of this kind will situate learners as "active contributors to their society" and offer them "the opportunity to use their online collaboration to undertake action or change in local or international contexts" (O'Dowd 2018, 15).

The future of virtual exchange appears to be bright yet still unclear in many respects. [...] In any case, although progress may be slow, it is clear that, in a world increasingly characterised by the rise of right-wing extremism, religious fanaticism, and populist political movements, virtual exchange will have an impor-

tant role to play as educators strive to develop active, informed, and responsible citizens who are tolerant of difference and who are actively engaged in political and democratic processes. (w21)

The traditional system of foreign language education based exclusively on the acquisition of the target language needs changing. Language teachers can go beyond their national perspective, and expand the space of their classroom fostering the dialogue with students located in other countries.

They can bring questions on real-world ethical issues into the curriculum, introduce tasks which allow students to work together in international teams and consequently to give real contributions. Intercultural citizenship virtual exchange is one of the ways of including civic engagement and responsibility in language classes, to help students to interpret the world around them and empower them to act upon the world.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The Language Forward Initiative project on gender equality aims to create a virtual space where students' global social participation and engagement is stimulated, guided and formally valued. Facilitated by Skype, regular virtual exchange between transnational teams allows the students to address this sociopolitical issue that has urgency in today's world, and that can be brought to the fore in their foreign language learning. Thus in the context of their language studies, the young people are empowered to actively reflect on their role in a democratic society, and situated as active contributors; that is, as intercultural and global citizens addressing social injustice and fostering gender equality. Furthermore, students engage also in experiential learning, testing the targeted languages in real life situations in their Skype calls and in their interactions with local authorities. We have tried to reimagine language learning classrooms as spaces for students to think and to take collective action in the world as active and engaged citizens, informed by the expression of their identity, reflection and critical enquiry, to foster gender equality and address issues of identity, diversity and inclusion. With this project we hope to collaborate and foster connections with colleagues in foreign language acquisition working in the area of gender equality and active citizenship worldwide.

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