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## **New Media in Higher Education: Sharing some Positive Practices**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper presents some advanced Information Technology (IT) tools as new media channels for virtual exchange (VE) in higher education (HE). Namely, Trello, Slack, Perusall, and Flipgrid are introduced through their key features and usability.*

*The benefits and challenges of international VE in teaching and learning environment are discussed as well. Reflections upon several successfully accomplished HE VE projects in the past few years, by the author and her peers from different foreign institutions, are given as examples of positive practices whilst using new media in transfer of knowledge and skills. At the end, the suggestions for uplifting HE VE, as a digital pedagogy model supported by contemporary media facilities, are given as a conclusion.*

**KEY WORDS:** New media, virtual exchange, Higher Education, Trello, Slach, Perusall, Flipgrid.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Most of the students in South Africa suffer inequality, economic crisis, unemployment, loud shedding, lack of data and gadgets, poor internet access, etc. Most of them live in rural areas with poor or no public transportation. Albeit, despite all these aggravating circumstances, emphasized by the recent pandemic, they have been deeply engaged into several VE projects, which I have arranged with my respected colleagues at HE institutions from Mexico, Brazil, China, and the United States of America (USA) during the past four years. Through seven different VE projects, we managed to join commonly non-joinable disciplines as: Electronic Navigation, Logistics, Research Methodology, Human-Computer Interaction, Computer Engineering, English as Foreign Language, Public Speaking, English Composition, and Critical Thinking.

The participants used English as a common platform for mutual understanding, even though their native languages were Serbo-Croatian, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, Georgian, and Nepali. We have accomplished these multi- and cross-disciplinary projects with great success and on behalf of all involved parties. In addition to common bilateral VE programs, two years ago we accomplished successfully the first trilateral VE project between South Africa, Mexico, and China. Last year, a four parties VE project, entitled “*Cultural adaptation in the context of global e-business with reference to food buying habits*“, which involved partners from South Africa, Mexico, China and the USA, is successfully accomplished too.

These were great, innovative and inspirational journeys, through which we learned from each other and uplifted our knowledge, including team work, digital literacy, intercultural awareness and communication skills. Mutual understanding and empathy, as well as our global emotional intelligence rose with each VE project. We, in South Africa, realized that our colleagues from different parts of the world, experienced job losses, economic insecurity, and alienation as well. Regardless of all these challenges amplified by the pandemic, we continued to work together and

communicate via Trello, Slack, Perusall, Flipgrid, Padlet, Wordpress, Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, etc.

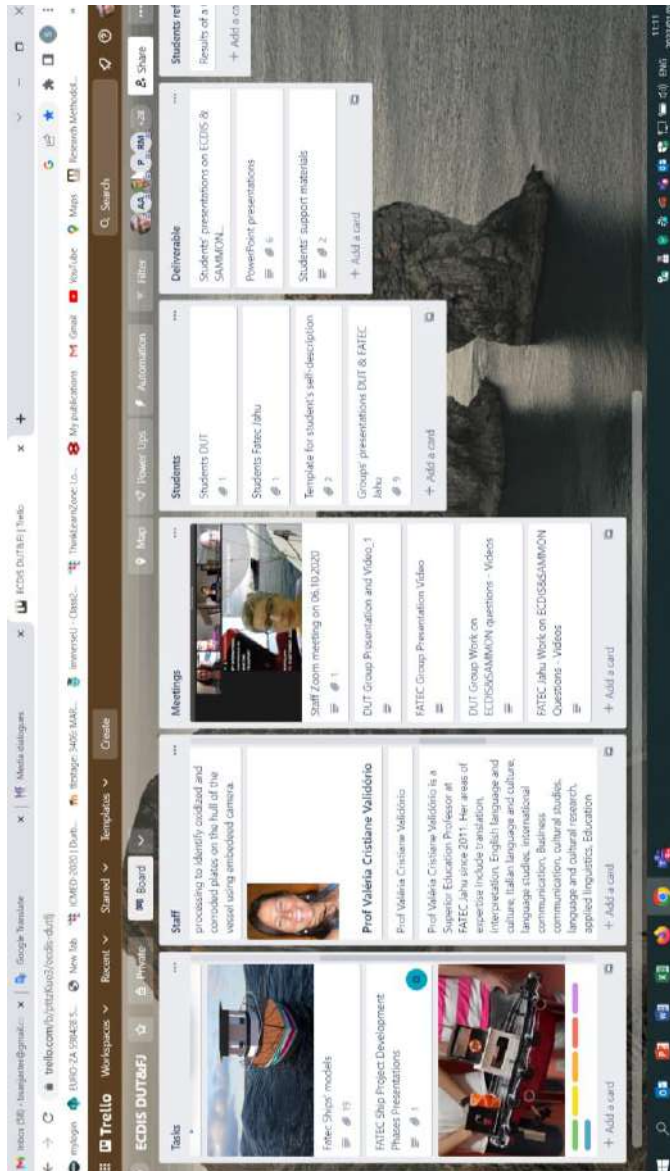
The students led these projects, while the professors were responsible for facilitation in using contemporary media tools, attaining new knowledge, cognitive and communication skills. Thanks to the experiences acquired through these projects, the professors published in close collaboration several journal and conference papers, and gave several talks on international virtual engagement through different webinars in Africa, America, Asia, Australia, and Europe. Thanks to our positive experiences, we do believe that VE projects will pave the path for the advanced, more resilient, accessible, by new media mediated HE in the future, which will be global, dominantly technology (media)-driven, life-long, collaborative and inclusive (Bauk, 2021).

Virtual (students') exchange, virtual (students') engagement, collaborative online international learning, tele-collaboration, or online intercultural exchange are terms for new teaching and learning approaches in HE. Virtual students' exchange is an umbrella term used to refer to the many different ways in which students are engaged in online collaborative learning with partners from other cultures as a part of their educational programmes. It is a framework under which students from two or more different universities (from different countries/continents) work together on a joint project, which is commonly, in advance agreed among their lecturers. These projects usually last between 4-8 weeks in the semester. Plenty of different media channels and IT apps are available for enhancing digital, multimodal and on campus pedagogy. Several studies on VE as a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary HE teaching and learning environment were conducted, while some of the most comprehensive ones explored through the desktop research and practice are referred in (Bauk, 2022; O'Connor et al., 2018; Brooks and Pitts, 2019; Brendel and Cornett-Murtada, 2019; Anderson et al., 2010; Brooks, 2011; Brooks, 2012; Puentedura, 2006; Hamilton et al., 2016; et al., 2014; Bower et al., 2010; Bauk and Radlinger, 2013; Bauk, 2019; Bauk and Fajardo-Flores, 2020; Jahnke, 2020; Bartsch et al., 2021). The rest of the paper is organized in a following manner: Section II presents key functional features of new media means in HE VE like Trello, Slack, Perusall, and Flipgrid; Section III highlights some benefits and challenges of HE VE; and, in Section VI, the conclusions are drawn, including some positive experiences from a global virtual classroom equipped with new media for knowledge and skills transfer.

## **1. TRELLO, SLACK, PERUSALL, AND FLIPGRID – NEW MEDIA IN HE VE**

Trello is a collaboration media tool, which is suitable for VE projects. It allows lecturers to arrange easily the project into boards. It immediately informs the user about the project, in terms, what is done, and what has to be done (Trello). It can be described as a white board, covered with lists of adhesive notes that are actually

tasks for lecturers and students forming the international team. The outlook of the Trello board developed for the needs of the VE entitled “ECDIS and SAMMON fast ma-neuvering simulation software”, which was realized by Fatec Jahu, Sao Paulo (Bra-sil) and Durban University of Technology, Durban (South Africa) two years ago, is given in Figure 1.

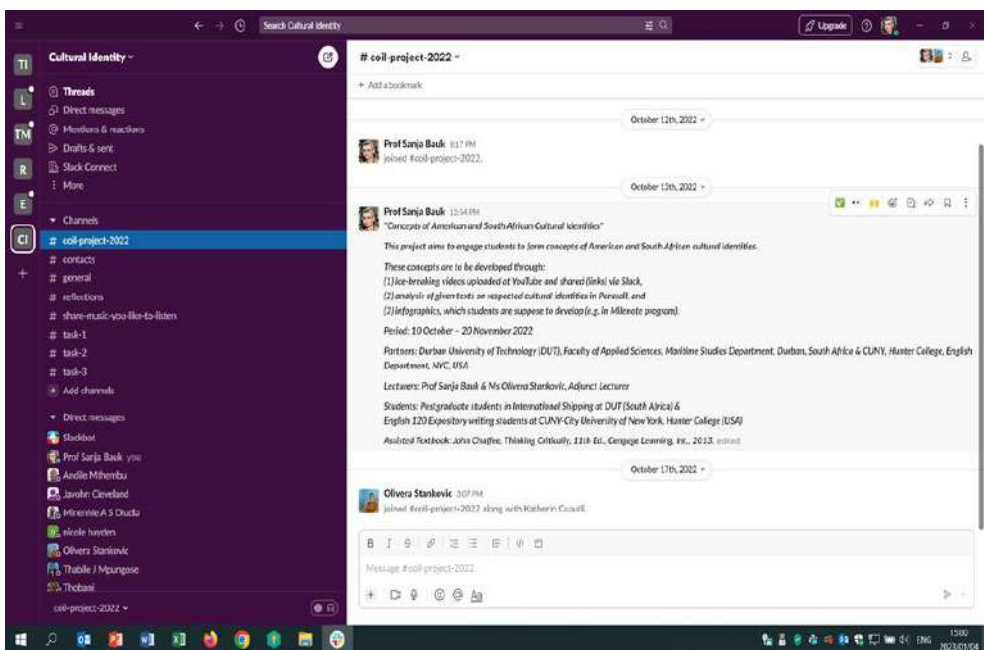


**Figure 1.** Trello board outlook: An example

Source: Own.

In another words, Trello is an interactive project management tool that allows lecturers and students to organize their work and tasks into visual boards. Lecturers can add tasks or cards to the project, assign deadlines, describe activities, required assets, design checklists, and assign tasks to peers. Trello free version users can upload of up to 10 MB from their own computers, or from Google Drive, Box, Dropbox, Microsoft OneDrive, YouTube, etc. Trello is intuitive and can be approached freely through several online platforms.

Slack is a messaging app “on steroids” (Slack). It is intended for teamwork. Slack is usable on multiple devices and platforms, and is enhanced with powerful features that enable users to chat not only 1:1 with peers, but also in teams. This app can be classified as a tool in the "Group Chat and Notifications" category, while WhatsApp is grouped under "Chatbot Platforms and Tools". Slack layout is more clear and transparent than WhatsApp one. It has more integrations and higher level of usability than WhatsApp, and communication can be arranged into different channels.



**Figure 2.** Slack project outlook: An example

Source: Own.

Slack serves for email, text and instant messaging for the whole team, and allows all communications in one single app. Thanks to its desktop and mobile versi-

ons, Slack can assist VE teams' collaboration and manage their work whether they are in the office, classroom, at home, or outdoors. Its main disadvantage is limited file storage. It is not recommended to send files through Slack instead of email, since users have limited storage and Slack slowly deletes files over time. This can cause unpleasant surprises. Besides, Slack constantly sends announcements about every new post, which can be annoying. An example of using Slack as a common communication platform within the project of VE entitled "Concepts of American and South African cultural identities", conducted between the lecturers and students from the USA and South Africa, last year, is given in Figure 2.

In combination with Slack, Perusall can be used, and this was the case with the previously mentioned project. Perusall is a social learning platform that instantly turns coursework into a social experience. When students interact together on assignments within Perusall, they are intrinsically motivated to perform better, honing their critical thinking skills and developing a deeper understanding of the material. Perusall is currently used by over 3 000 000 students in over 90 countries [20]. This HE media platform is developed by Harvard University and Perusall Labs to help students, educators, researchers, and society at large. In VE projects, students can insert annotations into the assigned texts for analysis and comment upon peers' comments, opening deeper discussion and learning from each other. An example of intensive Perusall discussion is given in Figure 3.

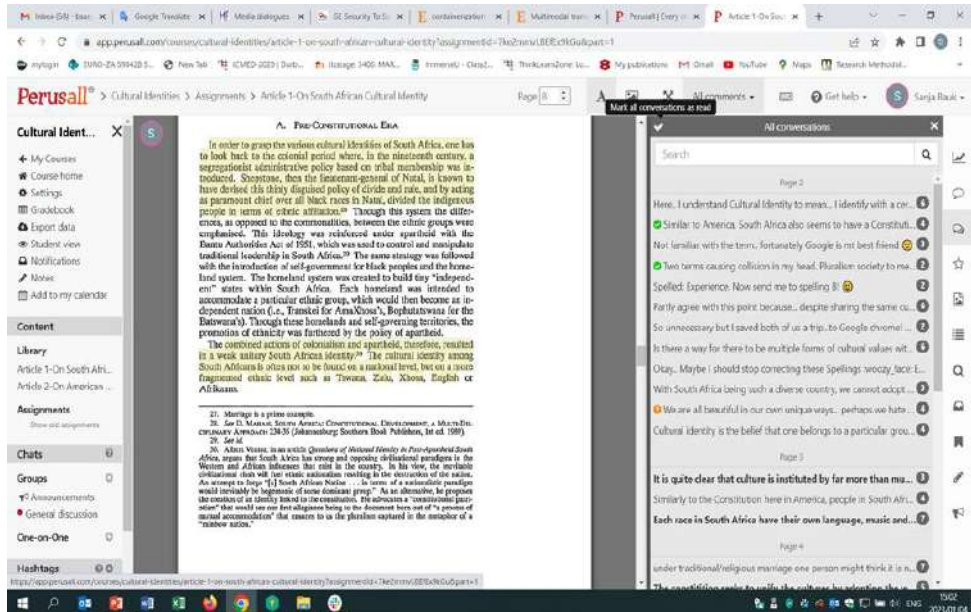
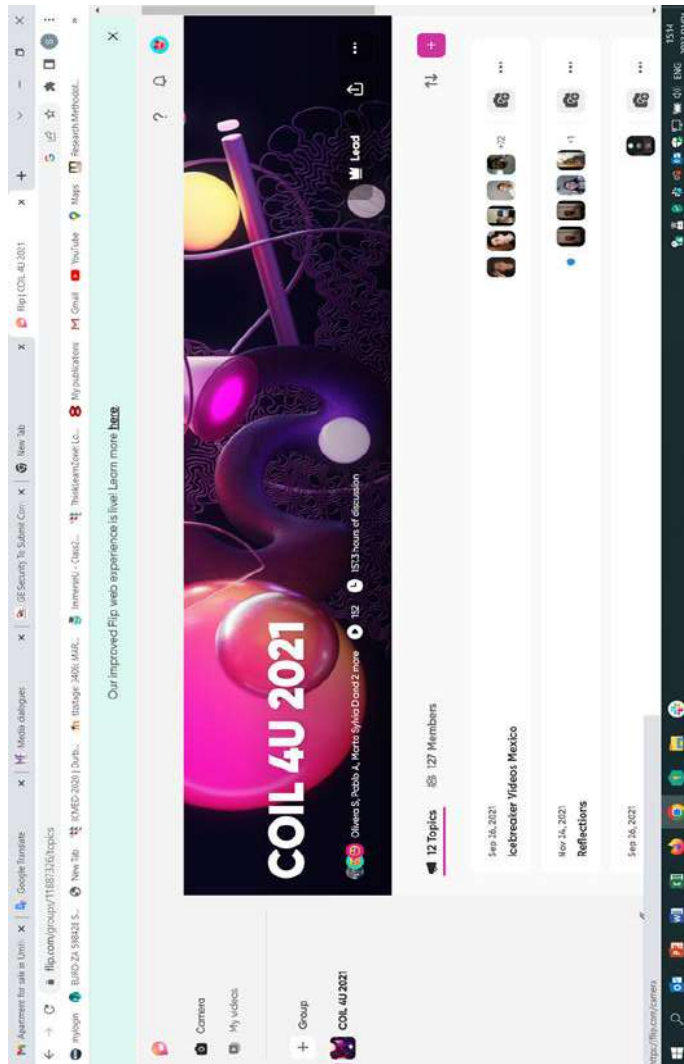


Figure 3. Annotations in Perusall: An example

Source: Own.

Flipgrid is a website and app, which enables teachers to arrange video discussions. Lecturers organize students into groups and allow them access to different discussion topics. It enables lecturers to arrange grids to facilitate students' video discussions. The grids are like message boards where teachers may set questions, named topics, and the students can directly record or upload video responses from their computers, which show up in the form of display. The maximum time allowed by Flipgrid for a response is five minutes.



**Figure 4.** Flipgrid project outlook: An example

Source: Own.

Flipgrid is compatible with many Microsoft (MS) products, including MS Teams for online meetings and MS OneNote for making notes. User can access the service by using personal email address or organizational one. One can record digital story – video, directly at Flipgrid environment or record it in Zoom, for instance, save it at the computer, and upload later to Flipgrid (Common Sense Education). A shortage of Flipgrid is that one cannot leave text message on the grid instead of video, except as a comment to someone else video, which is already uploaded. In Figure 4 is given a sample of Flipgrid project “Cultural adaptation in the context of global e-business with reference to food buying habits” realized among four HE institutions from Mexico, China, South Africa and the USA in 2021. The students were grouped into seven international teams while working on different project tasks. The outputs were presented through video recordings or digital stories related to certain project tasks- topics.

## **2. PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF NEW MEDIA SUPPORTED VE IN HE**

The empirically acquired knowledge about VE in HE, including findings from might be summarized as follows, but these are not limited to. Namely, VE in HE:

- Enables lecturers and students mobility at home;
- Enhances students creativity;
- Boosts curiosity and motivate students to learn;
- Provokes inquiry and problem solving approaches in teaching and learning;
- Supports informal teaching and learning styles;
- Uplifts students’ transferable and digital meaning-making skills;
- Enables students to implement theoretical knowledge in resolving real life problems;
- Allows students to communicate knowledge in the global context;
- Encourage students to become ethically engaged and their global awareness rises;
- Enhances students to experience integrative learning;
- Supports multi-layered communication through different digital channels and IT tools;
- Offers students opportunities to learn across diverse contexts, to reflect and self-assess;
- Enables student-centered or student-lead learning, while lectures are facilitators;
- Prepares students to respond efficiently to new and challenging issues, etc.

Some frails of VE projects in HE can be summarized as follows, but they are not limited to:

- Different time zones;
- Foreign languages;
- Differences in institutional cultures and experiences;
- Variations of academic rules and requirements;
- Distinction in courses structure, assessments, quality assurance systems, etc.;
- Deficiency of new media, IT apps, facilities, and organizational assistance provided to lecturers and students by the HE institutions, etc.

Obviously, the list of advantages of VE in HE digital classrooms is considerably longer than the one of its disadvantages. Therefore, we can expect more often and more extensive implementation of VE in HE institutions worldwide.

## CONCLUSION

The paper presents key features of new HE media tools like Trello, Slack, Perusall, and Flipgrid that can be used for VE and learning beyond the “disciplinary tribes” and beyond the borders. VE, underpinned by new media channels for knowledge transfer and enriching, is a kind of creative space for both lecturers and students around the globe. It gives participants flavor of different customs and languages and prepare them for prospective physical encounters in the future. It enhances a holistic approach towards gathering knowledge, creating new one, and better participants’ mutual understanding. This student-centered teaching-learned approach unleashes the potentials of cross-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary approaches. It boosts research curiosity, i.e. inquiry and real world problem solving based pedagogy in the global digital classroom without the walls.

The apps as Trello, Slack, Perusall, and Flipgrid, which are presented in the paper, can provide great assistance to both lecturers and students in the VE settings. Further investigation in this field should search for institutional frameworks through which such projects can be realized more smoothly. Besides, methods of providing technical and organizational support to both lectures and students should be established and tested in practice. Providing support in terms of overcoming language barriers should be elaborated, as well. Ways of sharing VE experiences among lectures and students at the international scale should be intensified through webinars, conferences, online publications, blogs, etc. The opportunities for lecturers and students to be rewarded upon the successful accomplishment of these projects should be ensured by the respective HE institutions and beyond.

As a lecturer and researcher, I like VE since it is a “free zone” for creative activities of both lecturers and students from different countries/continents. It turns teaching and learning into pleasure! VE gives participants flavor of different customs

and languages and prepares them for prospective physical encounters in the future. VE instigates profound changes in my lecturing style. Previously, my lectures were tied to the curriculum and I did not think about including findings from other disciplines. Regarding cross- and multi-disciplinary approaches, my students were suspicious at the beginning, until they realized how many different things in fact affect the topic they study. By practicing cross- and multi-disciplinary approaches via new media channels, academic partners should simplify concepts to make them understandable to students from different disciplines. This is a challenge, but worth of doing it, since this broadens students' views and opens them new horizons.

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