

THE ETWINNING EXPERIENCE: BEYOND SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

eTwinning has become a learning laboratory for the application of Innovation and Communication Technology (ICT) across classrooms in Europe. Initial teacher training institutions (TTI) are aware of the impact ICT is having on students' lives at all levels of our education system. eTwinning has the potential to restructure traditional models of education and some universities such as the *Universidad Rey Juan Carlos* (URJC) are introducing eTwinning as part of their curriculum to make sound pedagogical use of ICTs. In this study, we present a descriptive analysis of URJC students' perceptions about the use of eTwinning in the higher education classroom. A group of URJC college students (n = 18) participated in this study. These students included prospective early childhood, elementary and high school teachers, and also prospective principals. An online questionnaire-based survey was conducted to assess students' perceptions. Findings suggest that eTwinning promotes collaboration and teamwork, stimulates students' interest and improves critical thinking skills. Results also indicate that eTwinning can influence the prospective teachers' work with students.

Keywords: eTwinning, teacher training, cooperative learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

eTwinning has become a learning laboratory for the application of Innovation and Communication Technologies (ICTs) across schools in Europe. eTwinning is an online community for educational institutions in Europe that promotes collaborations across classrooms and "has evolved into a massive community for schools in Europe" [1] under the European Union's Lifelong Learning Program since 2005. eTwinning is a school collaboration initiative that has a high potential for augmenting collaboration between students, and between students and teachers in an online learning community. These learning communities bring together community members around the world in directing the course of education in innovative ways. This virtual environment has already produced over 62,528 projects involving over 490,474 teachers and 183,613 educational institutions [2].

Since the creation of eTwinning, there has been an exponential growth in the use of ICTs in learning and teaching. Educators are quite open to using technology for supporting both teaching and learning processes, and they are aware technology is having an increasing influence on the pedagogical design of learning and teaching [3]. In fact, initial teacher training institutions (TTI) such as the *Universidad Rey Juan Carlos* (URJC) are aware of these changes and the impact of new learning tools such as eTwinning on students' lives at all levels of the education system, including the higher education classroom.

eTwinning provides promising opportunities for collaborative learning environments for educational institutions in which the educational community can reflect, build an understanding of innovative instructional approaches and support educators' continuous professional development [4] within a secure network and platform. Moreover, eTwinning provides a safe space in which the educational community can form partnerships with colleagues from other European countries and develop collaborative projects. Moreover, through participating in this networked environment, educational institutions can enhance the teaching-learning process.

In the year 2012 the European Commission launched the pilot building bridges between eTwinning and higher education institutions, including the URJC, in order to guide future teachers towards the successful eTwinning action. The active role of eTwinning within higher educational networked learning appears to be essential since it offers students the opportunity to participate in collaborative learning projects. Besides, eTwinning has the potential to restructure traditional models of education and some universities such as the URJC are introducing eTwinning as part of their curriculum to make sound pedagogical use of ICTs beyond school classrooms.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

In order to track the impact of the eTwinning experience on URJC students' development, we developed, pilot tested, and validated a survey instrument designed to provide more comprehensive data on their perceptions in terms of engagement, life-skills such as teamwork and cooperation, ICT skills and knowledge and a sense of belonging to the educational community.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

A total of 18 female students from URJC participated in the study. These students included prospective early childhood ($n = 7$), elementary ($n = 8$) and high school teachers ($n = 1$), and also prospective principals ($n = 2$) from the URJC participating in the *eTwinning TTI Initiative* during the academic year 2015/2016. The mean age for students participating in the study was 24.61 ($SD = 7.03$).

2.2 Procedure

At the end of the eTwinning experience in September 2016, online surveys were distributed through university emails to all students actively participating during the previous academic year in the *eTwinning TTI Initiative*, highlighting its purpose and benefits of the study. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous.

2.3 Instrument and Data Analysis

The instrument used for this study was a survey questionnaire designed by the primary investigators. The survey consisted of three sections. In the first section, participants were asked demographic questions. The second section of the survey included 20 questions about their opinions of the experience. The respondents answered these questions using a 5-point Likert scale. The points of the scale were labelled "Strongly disagree", "Disagree", "Neutral", "Agree", and "Strongly Agree". Finally, in the third section, the participants were asked two yes/no questions and complete one free-response question about the benefits of using eTwinning. Descriptive statistics were calculated via means, standard deviations and percentages, using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0).

3 RESULTS

The Likert scale questions used in this analysis with the frequency data for the responses to each of these questions, and the mean response for each question are presented in Table 1. The means for the 20 questions range from 3.33 to 4.28, indicating that most of the students had a favorable opinion of the eTwinning's impact on their learning. Findings suggests that eTwinning should be included in schools (83.3%) and in TTI (83.3%) as part of the curriculum. eTwinning can facilitate student learning to help them succeed and improve their learning further (72.2%). Further, the active nature of eTwinning appears to boost not only students' motivation (88.9%) but teachers' (83.3%) as well.

Most students agreed or strongly agreed that eTwinning fosters autonomous learning (83.4%) and is an essential tool for the multicultural classroom (88.9%). Likewise, 88.9% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that, through eTwinning, they were able to improve their group decision-making skills. Further, 88.9% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they perceived great involvement among their peers and 83.3% experienced eTwinning as a tool that reinforces the acquisition of key competences. The results indicate also that all participants would implement eTwinning in their schools. Comments that speak to the perceived benefits of eTwinning include the following: "Cooperation between teachers, another way of seeing education, innovation"; "freedom, [eTwinning] is collaborative and motivating"; "creativity [...] implication of students and teachers, multicultural interest"; and it "improves classroom tech skills".

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Each Survey Likert Scale Question.

Survey Likert Type Questions	Frequency and Percentage of Response					Mean (n = 18)	Standard Deviation (n = 18)
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree		
My eTwinning experience has reinforced my sense of belonging to the educational community.	1	2	2	11	2	3.61	1.037
	5.6%	11.1%	11.1%	61.1%	11.1%		
My eTwinning experience has shown me real school practice.	1	0	6	7	4	3.72	1.018
	5.6%	0.0%	33.3%	38.9%	22.2%		
I have experienced the potential of digital tools in the classroom.	1	0	6	9	2	3.61	0.916
	5.6%	0.0%	33.3%	50.0%	11.1%		
My group decision-making skills have improved.	1	1	9	7	0	3.22	0.808
	5.6%	5.6%	50.0%	38.9%	0.0%		
My leadership skills have been reinforced.	1	0	10	6	1	3.33	0.840
	5.6%	0.0%	55.6%	33.3%	5.6%		
My preparation for project-based learning has improved.	1	1	5	9	2	3.56	0.984
	5.6%	5.6%	27.8%	50.0%	11.1%		
The schedule for the project has been efficiently handled.	1	1	6	9	1	3.44	0.982
	5.6%	5.6%	33.3	50.0%	5.6%		
I am aware of the challenges posed by eTwinning projects and I know how to successfully face them.	1	0	5	9	3	3.72	0.958
	5.6%	0.0%	27.8%	50.0%	16.7%		
I intend to develop eTwinning projects when I work as a teacher.	0	0	5	11	2	3.83	0.618
	0.0%	0.0%	27.80%	61.1%	11.1%		
eTwinning is an advantageous tool for the multicultural classroom.	0	0	2	12	4	4.11	0.583
	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	66.7%	22.2%		
eTwinning reinforces the acquisition of key competences.	0	0	3	13	2	3.94	0.539
	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	72.2%	11.1%		
eTwinning fosters autonomous learning.	0	0	3	12	3	4.00	0.594
	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	66.7%	16.7%		
I have perceived great involvement among my peers / students.	1	1	14	2	0	2.94	0.639
	5.6%	5.6%	77.8%	11.1%	0.0%		
I have been able to use my prior knowledge to design an eTwinning project.	1	1	7	7	2	3.44	0.984
	5.6%	5.6%	38.9%	38.9%	11.1		
I have improved my assessment techniques.	1	0	11	4	2	3.33	0.907
	5.6%	0.0%	61.1%	22.2%	11.1%		
eTwinning projects can improve student motivation.	0	0	2	12	4	4.11	0.583
	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	66.7%	22.2%		
eTwinning projects can improve teacher motivation.	0	1	2	11	4	4.00	0.767
	0.0%	5.6%	11.1%	61.1%	22.2%		
There is evidence that eTwinning projects lead to improvements in academic performance.	1	1	5	10	1	3.50	0.924
	5.6%	5.6%	27.8%	55.6%	5.6%		
I believe eTwinning should be used at schools.	0	0	3	11	4	4.06	0.639
	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	61.1%	22.2%		
I believe the handling of eTwinning must be taught at Schools of Education.	0	0	3	7	8	4.28	0.752
	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	38.9%	44.4%		

4 CONCLUSION

The overall perception regarding the implementation of eTwinning at the URJC setting was highly positive. Most participants believe eTwinning should be introduced as a collaborative pedagogical tool beyond the K-12 classroom. In fact, guiding future educators towards the implementation of collaborative pedagogical approaches such as eTwinning in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is essential. In order to implement eTwinning in TTI, educators should experience for themselves what eTwinning learning means and how they can mutually benefit from it. Future research should examine the impact of implementing eTwinning in TTI in the European Higher Education Area to improve learning further.

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