

Frequently Asked Questions: Technological competencies

1. Which tools should I use?

One of the very first decisions when it comes to tools is choosing a kind of platform which will help you store the materials, communicate with your groups, help the students get in touch with one another and also upload their work. If one of the partnering institutions has a Moodle platform, a separate Moodle course is one of the choices, with both teachers having the teaching rights there. Other options include creating a blog, a website or wiki site (**a list of suggested tools can be found in the technology-related training module**), depending on which functionalities are seen by the teachers as vital.

Once the platform has been selected, it is good to think of what tasks the students are supposed to do, since this informs the choice of tools. E.g. if the students are to create a certain product in intercultural groups, tools which have the co-editing function come particularly useful (e.g. Prezi for creating presentations or wiki for collaborative writing). When it comes to communication tools, it is important to consider the following:

- Do you want the students to communicate orally or in writing?
- Do you expect the students to communicate in real time (e.g. during in-class meetings) or asynchronously (e.g. from home)?

All the decisions need to be consulted with the partnering teacher.

2. How do the students communicate in the project?

Communication is at the core of any telecollaborative project so one of the very first decisions that the teachers need to make is how they want their students to get in touch with one another and cooperate online.

Here, the following aspects should be considered:

- Do I want my students to communicate in real time? Is this possible? Can I synchronise my class time with that of my fellow teacher? Are our time zones close enough?
- Do I expect my students to elaborate on the language they use? Should they have some thinking time before they post their ideas? – Asynchronous communication e.g. forums, emails is better suited if you want to concentrate on form.
- Do I want to follow students' communication? Do I want to archive their discourse for future use? (asynchronous communication is easier to archive and analyse).
- Is the mode of communication (written vs. oral) of importance to the project objectives?

Depending on how you answer these question, you can find a lot of tools for communication. View this section to see a list of popular communication tools.

In general, it is absolutely necessary to have at least one channel for communication that all the exchange participants have access to. It can be an emergency forum with forced subscription, a mailing list or a Facebook group, to mention the most popular options.

Apart from the official channels suggested by the teachers, the students are very likely to use channels for informal communication. This is desirable and should not be frowned upon. Depending on personal preferences, the students may communicate via Skype, email or chat. Facebook groups are also very popular. Informal communication is evidence of social bonds between the students.

3. What technology-related problems can I expect?

Technology tends to be fallible but once this has been accepted, it is easier to think of solutions and prepare plan B. In general, the most common problems include:

- failed communication due to incorrect settings the most common being lack of subscription to forums – such problems, once realized, are very easy to fix.
- misjudged affordances of a tool – e.g. it turns out that the functionalities the teachers expected are restricted to paid users, only.
- the tool is unexpectedly upgraded or it disappears. To avoid such situations it is advisable to use well established services.

Whenever the students are to use certain tools on their own, it is a good idea to recommend good quality tutorials. You can find a selection of these here.

The students may also report that they cannot work from home due to missing plug-ins, low bandwidth or computer crashes. The teacher can suggest a solution, if possible, but may also encourage one to seek help with fellow students. Alternatively, the student can be suggested to work from the computer lab.

4. How technology-savvy should the teacher be?

This is a common concern among teachers.

Indeed, working knowledge of some tools is helpful because it prompts task design. If you know what can be done with a particular tool you can think of new creative tasks. However, you are not expected to be an IT expert to be a good telecollaborative teacher. Your expertise lies elsewhere – first and foremost you are a well-qualified teacher who can take good care of tasks and the students' performance. In many cases you can ask the students to help you with technology. They will feel privileged to show their computer skills.