Case 2

COIL – SUNY exchanges

The following excerpt comes from a report on virtual exchanges between 24 teams as part of a US-funded initiative. The full report can be found here: http://coil.suny.edu/case-studies

"Most courses experienced some degree of technical problems primarily related to Internet bandwidth and access regarding both institutional platforms and social media tools. As far as the latter is concerned, the problem was related to those teams who wanted cloud-based tools with password-access only; in this case one person (a teacher in the absence of technicians) becomes the administrator of the site and this creates extra work for them and access problems when, for example, institutions have firewalls that block certain social media sites.

Not surprisingly the support of technical staff made a difference for those with access to it. For example, in one exchange there were four people to support the US teacher (two student assistants, one IT tech and one instructional designer) and one technician in the partner country who was often assisted by the team in the US to resolve tech problems. Faculty who did not have much tech support seemed frustrated by the extra workload and/or lack of expertise in managing the tools. Not surprisingly, there was a higher learning curve when one or more groups of students were using tools and/or platforms they were not previously familiar with. This is precisely why some teams integrated a few sessions for familiarization with the technology prior to the exchange. One faculty from an international institution commented:

It's our opinion, based on personal experience, that technical aspects of any web-enhanced course are viewed as a problem if it is so for the instructor. It turns out to be obvious that instructors showing enthusiasm with ICT [Information and Communication Technologies] will experience fewer difficulties and transmit that same enthusiasm to the learners. Those who don't may transmit the opposite effect.

"Some loved it, some hated it." This comment made by one faculty member speaks to the fact that student preferences depend on many factors from learning style, to communication preferences, to familiarity with the tool, etc. However, using more than one tool and more than one communication mode allowed teams to meet the various needs of different students.

Many Fellows reported having learned that different tools lend themselves to different types of tasks and communication and that these initial courses helped them learn more about which tools are more or less appropriate for their given situation and course aims. Facebook, for example, proved to be useful for coordinating groups of students who were collaborating and were eager to use a tool they   used in their personal

lives to set up meetings, deadlines, etc. with their international peers. Some cohorts even created groups in Facebook where they could both work on class-related tasks and engage in informal interaction. Fellows seemed to feel that students were more comfortable completing academic tasks, such as commentaries on and discussions of readings, within an LMS rather than on social media tools4. Similarly, Fellows found that video conferencing (when and where possible) was very effective for shared lectures and discussions whereas a tool such as Skype was more appropriate for 1-to-1 or small group communication.