

Researching Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

This short paper begins with a brief overview of the expansion of the field of virtual exchange. It then focuses on a recent European policy experiment which sought to expand the scope of the well known Erasmus+ mobility programme through the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project. Both the challenges and the opportunities that this project provided from a research perspective are highlighted as well as some of the relevant findings, in particular those related to the themes of the conference such as the preparation of future graduates for multicultural work and study environments.

Keywords: *virtual exchange, telecollaboration, intercultural dialogue, global competence*

Introduction

The title of this conference is ‘expanding networks’ and one of its aims is “to explore virtual exchange (VE) from the perspective of its consolidation”. This is certainly timely as the field has truly expanded in the last few years, beyond foreign language education, where it is already quite well consolidated.

The recent attention to VE from university administrations is no doubt related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the sudden halt it placed on international student mobility (De Wit & Altbach, 2020; De Wit & Deca, 2020; O’Dowd, 2021). It is difficult to know what the long term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will be on education, though there is already much speculation. We know that it has exposed many already existing inequities, such as access to education, Internet and suitable devices. Furthermore, women and underserved groups have been affected more than other groups (Bozkurt et al., 2020). It is recognised by educational researchers that the “remote emergency education” implemented during the pandemic was not quality online education; much of it consisted in the transferring of traditional lecture-based classroom practices to the online or dual/ hyflex mode. The pandemic has opened the floor to important discussions as to how technology will continue to be used in higher education as our classrooms open up again. There are serious and well-founded concerns about an “edtech pandemic shock” leading to the further privatization and

commercialization of education (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). At the same time, there is a range of already established and also more recent approaches to online teaching and learning which are open, collaborative, ethical and inclusive, amongst which I would include virtual exchange.

Virtual exchange is a form of online teaching and learning that existed well before the pandemic and has a long history in foreign language education in particular, with growing networks of practitioners. There are various models and typologies of VE but they all share a focus on sustained student interaction and collaboration across geographic and cultural distances. VE is well known within certain academic conferences, publications and networks such as TAPP (Arnó-Macià et al., 2019), TeleTandem (Vassallo & Telles, 2006) and UNICollaboration (O'Dowd, 2018), for example. However, VE is not yet a fully recognized practice in higher education, as one could say international student mobility is, though networks such as COIL and some higher education institutions, particularly in the United States, have well established VE programmes where content lecturers also do VE. In recent years, there have been some large scale EC funded policy experimentations which have sought to support the integration of VE in higher education, including the European Commission's Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative¹.

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (EVE) was a large-scale, 3- year pilot project, complementing the Erasmus mobility programme and implemented by a consortium of organizations that won a call for tenders (Helm & Van der Velden, 2020). The project objectives set by the European Commission were:

- Encouraging intercultural dialogue and increasing tolerance through online people-to-people interactions, building on digital, youth-friendly technologies;
- Promoting various types of Virtual Exchange as a complement to Erasmus+ physical mobility, allowing more young people to benefit from intercultural and international experience;
- Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly in the use of the Internet and social media, to develop resistance to discrimination and indoctrination;
- Fostering the soft skills development of students, young people and youth workers, including the practice of foreign languages and teamwork, notably to enhance employability;
- Supporting the objectives of the 2015² Paris declaration to promote citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education;

¹ https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual_en

² http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/20150316-paris-education_en

- Strengthening the youth dimension of the EU neighbouring policy with Southern Mediterranean countries.

The pilot project provided a rich ‘ecology’ of virtual exchange, with opportunities for young people (aged 18-30) both within and outside of formal education in European and South Mediterranean countries to take part in different models of virtual exchange. Training was provided for educators and youth workers to design virtual exchange programmes, for debate leaders, and for facilitators who were trained in multi-partiality and cross-cultural group processes.

Facilitator-led, dialogue-based models were designed and implemented by NGOs *Soliya* and *Sharing Perspectives Foundation*. Drawing on the practice of intergroup dialogue, which is used in peace studies, conflict resolution and intergroup relations, these exchanges focused on issues such as gender and media, the environment, migration, religion and politics. Organized in groups of 10-12 people coming from different European and South Mediterranean countries, participants engaged in dialogue with the support of facilitators who had been trained in neutrality and multi-partiality. Participants had video and/or reading materials to watch and read prior to 2-hour dialogue sessions which were held weekly for 4-10 weeks, depending on the programme³. These exchanges were not designed for language learning but many students took part to improve their English language (the language of most of these exchanges), sometimes as a component or alternative to their university language courses. Another model of VE implemented was the co-designed exchange, developed in partnership by teaching staff to meet specific needs and learning objectives. Several of these exchanges were interdisciplinary, often involving language teachers partnering with colleagues and classes from different disciplinary areas such as Fluid Mechanics Engineering (Fernandez-Raga and Villard, 2020), Economics (Koris, Hernández-Nanclares & Mato, 2020), tourism and linguistics (Hahn & Radke, 2020). These exchanges could be seen as a form of internationalised ESP courses (Verzella, Arnó Macià & Maylath, 2021).

Methods

EVE presented an opportunity to research the impact of different models of virtual exchange with data from large numbers of participants, unlike much of the telecollaboration research to date which has focused largely on single classrooms and case studies. Though the different models shared key aspects of VE, such as the centrality of student interaction and collaboration, there were also divergences in terms of objectives, duration, and pedagogic design.

³ See for example the Climate Movements programme <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/programme/climate-movements/> and the Soliya Connect Programs <https://soliya.net/connect-program>

In the three years of the project, 28,426 young people (82% of whom were between 18-25) took part in exchange activities, hence well beyond the 25,000 target established by the European Commission, and 5,115 took part in training activities. 61% of the participants were female and 49% of participants were from South Mediterranean countries, 51% from European countries. This shows geographic balance between the regions, which is quite distinct from participation patterns in mobility where numbers are much smaller and flows are principally towards Europe.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to the research project. Quantitative data was gathered through pre- and post-exchange surveys and looked at attitudinal change in terms of self-esteem, curiosity, intercultural communication and attitudes towards people from different ethnic and religious groups. Post-exchange surveys addressed three broad clusters: perceived improvement in 21st century skills, perceived improvement in global competences, and what we called *activation*, which included interest in mobility or further opportunities for exchanges and sharing what they learnt with others. Data was gathered every six months, which allowed for a constant feedback loop with exchange implementers, as well as the aggregation of data over multiple iterations of project activities. As the surveys were not mandatory, response rates were considerably lower than the number of participants. In the final year of the project there were 3,544 complete responses to the pre- post exchange surveys and over 5,000 responses to the post-survey items.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted after participants had completed exchanges and the surveys, and data was triangulated for a more nuanced understanding of the findings. We sought to identify the mechanisms of change, factors that led to perceived improvements, as well as to explore the learning outcomes of the different models. Interviews were held with a range of stakeholders, including participants, facilitators and exchange coordinators.

Findings

A small, but statistically significant increase in participants' self esteem and curiosity and above all perceived effectiveness in intercultural communication was found overall. Participants' feelings towards people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds improved significantly in the dialogue-based exchanges that had been intentionally designed to address dividing lines (Helm & van der Velden, forthcoming).

Survey respondents perceived improvement in their 21st century skills, above all active listening (91%) and critical thinking (84%). Though very few of the exchanges were designed explicitly for language learning, 79% of survey respondents felt they had improved their English and/or foreign language skills. Through the thematic exchanges many participants felt they acquired some of the specific language required to talk about issues discussed, particularly when content was provided in the form of videos and/or readings, thus providing them with a shared common ground to begin their

discussions and familiarity with key terms. As well as their vocabulary, it was above all their communicative confidence, listening and speaking skills that participants felt they developed, as most of the exchanges used synchronous video-communication.

In terms of global competences, knowledge and/or interest in global events was reported to have grown (85%) as well as understanding of the relationships between different societies (79%). Nearly three quarters of respondents felt that they had built meaningful relationships (72%) and many interviewees and focus group participants reported keeping in touch after the end of the project. The factors that most contributed to participants' positive evaluations of their experiences and learning were the encounters with peers across Europe and Southern Mediterranean and engaging with a diversity of perspectives and experiences.

As regards the different models of virtual exchange, there were - unsurprisingly - different learning outcomes due to differences in the design of the exchanges. Analysis of the pre-post exchange surveys found that the dialogue-based models had a higher impact on attitudes towards people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and the engagement and satisfaction of participants. Through responses to open questions and interviews, it was found that this was attributed to the very heterogeneous backgrounds of the participants, the depth of the facilitator-led dialogues and the intentional addressing of intergroup divides. The co-designed, largely task-based models of exchange fostered the development of problem-solving and collaborative skills. Some interviewees expressed frustration at difficulties in organizing and sustaining collaboration, but often it was in overcoming the challenges that learning occurred. In some cases there was a wish to spend more time on the social and intercultural dimensions of their learning in the exchanges.

Discussion

The monitoring and evaluation was carried out through the three years of the project and findings were regularly discussed with the project consortium and informed subsequent iterations of exchanges. This feedback loop was positive as it allowed for adjustments to be made to the exchanges. It also fostered 'cross-pollination' between models, for example the introduction of facilitated dialogue sessions supported by trained facilitators into some of the co-designed, small scale exchanges to support participants in getting to know one another and to build the intercultural dimension of the exchange.

There are, of course, limitations to the research approach adopted. While self-reporting is valuable in assessing perceived improvement in linguistic, intercultural and digital competences, it is not a direct measure of competence. Furthermore, respondents may not share the same understanding of the concepts addressed, which can lead to a response bias and different interpretations of the scales used for the self-assessment, for example. These were addressed as far as possible through the

statistical analysis, and triangulation of the data, with many interviews and focus groups carried out. Also, the scale of the project and the multiple exchange types carried out did not allow for the more nuanced and contextualised understanding that is present in case study research, for example.

Finally, there are inevitably tensions when carrying out funded research on a pilot project for policy makers, as they define the research agenda, the time-scale and define aspects such as what kind of data can and cannot be gathered. Furthermore, as Block (2018) writes, there are certain keywords and discourses that one has to use when applying for European funding, in particular the discourse of 'neoliberal citizenship' with its focus on skills, competitiveness and employability, though one might actually feel distant from them. These discourses are also inevitably reproduced in reporting the findings of the research.

Conclusions

To return to the themes of this conference and the questions raised, the findings of the EVE research study support the argument that virtual exchange can offer students and academics opportunities to expand their international and multidisciplinary networks and also prepare graduates for complex multicultural work and study environments. It can also contribute to students' understanding of global issues and enrich the ecology of knowledge through the diversity of perspectives with which they can engage. The learning outcomes will, however, depend on several factors which include the pedagogic design of the project, the nature of partnerships established and the specific objectives of the exchange. While being part of large scale projects funded by supranational organizations, such as the European Commission, may place some constraints on both practice and research, it is important, in particular for educators and students who hope to see some form of institutional recognition and support for this transnational, international and intercultural practice.

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