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MULTIMODAL
DESIGN FOR
VIRTUAL
EXCHANGE



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5.1.

What is virtual exchange?

Virtual Exchange (VE) comprises online practices of intercultural collaborative learning (O'Dowd, 2018). It is a form of internationalization at home, which allows students to engage in virtual teamwork with peers from other countries. By eliminating the need to travel physically, VE is an ecological and accessible way of going on a short student exchange. In addition, it offers a unique intercultural learning experience, during which the participants can learn about each other's cultures.

During the collaborative experience, the students learn how to engage with difference, how to manage uncertainty, and how to communicate efficiently. VE is built on the idea of overcoming challenges in a creative and collaborative way. By moving out of their institution's learning bubble, students encounter new challenges and solve problems as members of an international team. In addition, they develop their intercultural, communication, and language skills.

As a teacher, I have been involved in the planning and realization of online international projects for about eight years now. Each VE project is unique (and messy) on its own. The students work in diverse teams, across time zones and cultures, using various digital tools. Virtual Exchange provides a learning journey in international team work, through which the participants learn not only about others but also about themselves.

5.2.

Teacher-facilitated VE

This chapter focuses on Virtual Exchange that is designed, organized, and facilitated by teachers. I will be drawing on my own projects as examples. If you would like to learn more about my VE projects and research, you can check out this [Trello board](#) (Háhn 2021a) or read a description of the pedagogical design in the article [Crossing Borders Without Travel: Virtual Exchange Practices for Students](#) (Háhn, 2019).

In addition to teacher-led projects, there are also other forms of VE, for example, facilitated dialogue exchanges that are offered by bigger educational organizations such as Soliya.¹ These organization-led exchanges bring together a diverse group of participants from different parts of the world and give them the opportunity to discuss social and global topics in the form of facilitated dialogues. The teacher-facilitated forms of VE are individual projects, bottom-up initiatives that are tailored to the needs of the students involved. They are not open to the general public in terms of registration because the participants do VE either as part of coursework or as their HEI's educational project.

Teacher-facilitated VEs do not require the establishment of official partnerships between the HEIs and are not dependent on joint courses or credit sharing. The collaborating teachers can design their projects so that those best serve their students' needs in terms of the theme, the learning outcomes, and the timing. The pedagogical design thus depends on the teachers' negotiation and imagination, emerging from their creativity. Although the projects are usually integrated into curriculum-based courses, they enrich the learning outcomes by bringing the world into the classroom. The students can work with peers from other countries who are enrolled in similar or different study programs. This way both intra- and interdisciplinary projects can be envisioned at the planning stage, which allows for the creation of working-life relevant projects.

The main topic of the VE can be negotiated by the teachers. In the case of interdisciplinary collaboration, the same theme can be approached from the perspective of different disciplines. The variety of perspectives can be an advantage in group work because the students can get an insight into the diversity of views and approaches to a topic. For example, in a Finnish-Polish project (Háhn & Radke, 2020), language and tourism majors were creating promotional videos about their cities, building on their subject-related expertise. The language experts did the language check of the video transcripts and shared their knowledge on promotional discourse, while the tourism management students contributed with information on tourism trends. All students took part in the material collection and the editing of the videos, which were the final tasks in the project.

¹ <https://soliya.net/>

5.3.

Role of multimodality in VE design

Multimodality plays an important role in the design of VE. From the very first step of entering the learning environment, the participants need to feel welcome and supported so that they can feel safe to start the collaboration. Multimodality can help to create trust and engagement by making the platforms and the communication channels welcoming. VE groups function as online Communities of Inquiry (Garrison, 2009; Garrison, 2017; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2010), in which the participants' social presence is one of the main factors responsible for the ideal learning experience. The Community of Inquiry framework was developed to describe the role of three presences (social, cognitive and teaching) in online learning.

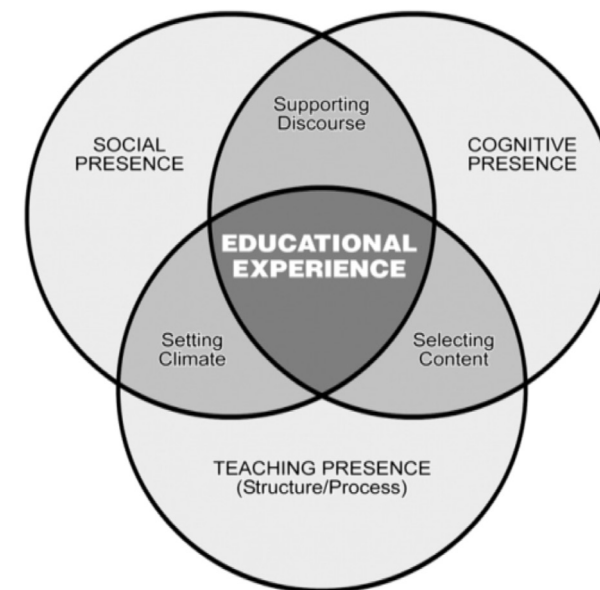


Figure 5.1.
The Community of Inquiry framework.
Source: Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2010: 6)

In the Community of Inquiry of online learning, social presence refers to the way of self-presentation, “the degree to which one is perceived as real and present” in the online environment (Garrison, 2009, 2017; Whiteside, 2017). Multimodality can enhance the development of social presence in Virtual Exchange (Háhn, 2020). The use of visuals, videos, emojis, and other multimodal elements can increase the feeling of this “realness” in the participants’ self-introductions and interactions. For example, the teachers can post short welcome videos or other multimodal messages (see Figures 5.2 and 5.3) and can encourage the students to introduce themselves in the form of video recordings or other multimodal messages (Figure 5.4) at the start of the project.

About Judit



Created by Judit Hahn

Figure 5.2. Screenshot from the author's self-introduction video (created by spark.adobe.com)

Virtual Exchange: First steps...

Hello and welcome to all of you who have joined this project! In this document, you can read about the very first things you need to do to get started. We wish you a nice learning and intercultural experience! Judit and [redacted]

Figure 5.3. Teachers' personal photos in a welcome message

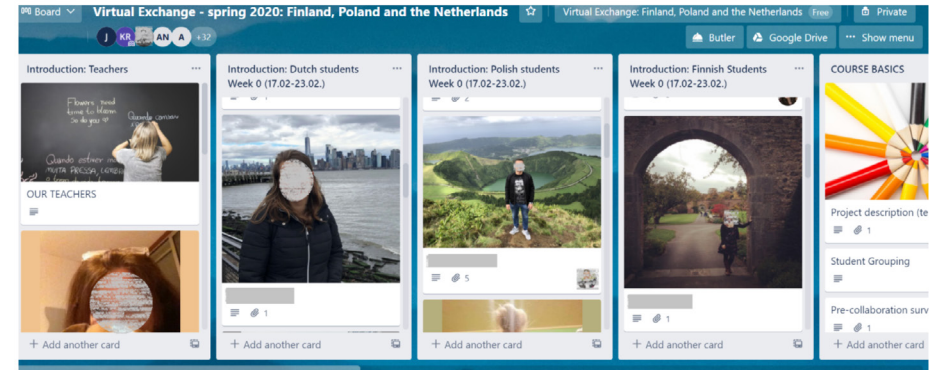


Figure 5.4. Student's self-introductions on Trello (created by trello.com)

Figure 5.2 shows a screenshot of my self-introductory video, which was created from a collage of photos, background music and voiceover with the help of Spark Adobe <https://spark.adobe.com/sp/>. The video also served as a welcome message to the Virtual Exchange project arranged between three universities (the University of Jyväskylä, Finland; the University of León, Spain, and the University of Bielsko-Biała, Poland) in 2019. Each of the teachers involved posted their self-introductory video in the shared online platform (Schoology <https://www.schoology.com/>) at the start of the project. In another Virtual Exchange that ran between the University of Jyväskylä and Waseda University, Japan, the teachers added their personal photos to their first message with the aim to increase their social presence (see Figure 5.3). In most VEs, the students are also encouraged to share their multimodal self-introductions, an example of which is shown in Figure 5.4 above, where they were asked to post an image and a self-introductory text above themselves.

Multimodality can enhance interaction during the collaborative stage of the project. The students need to be in touch with each other on a regular basis and exchange messages. It is good if they can choose their own communication channels that are not shared with the teachers, for example, they can set up their own WhatsApp or a Messenger group. The use of emojis, gifs and other non-linguistic resources enables them to express their thoughts and feelings in a more informal way. This can increase not only their engagement, but it can also strengthen the process of community building.

The tasks that the students get can also be designed in a way that requires multimodal creation. For example, they can present the outcomes of their group work in the form of an online magazine, a social media page, or even a video (see Figure 5.5). By engaging in multiliteracy practices and co-creation, the students can develop their digital, visual, and design skills.



Figure 5.5. Screenshots from the “Bike & Beer” video created by the Big Hero team in the 2020 Virtual Exchange between Finland, Poland, and the Netherlands

In the example above (Figure 5.5), screenshots are shown from the video made by members of the Big Hero 6 team in the “City-break in Europe” Virtual Exchange in 2020. The VE focused on city tourism and involved language majors from Finland (University of Jyväskylä), tourism students from Poland (Adam Mickiewicz University), and business students from the Netherlands (Utrecht University of Applied Sciences). The main task of the VE was to create a promotional video about three cities: Jyväskylä, Poznań, and Utrecht. The students worked in teams for seven weeks and were free to choose the genre of their promotional product. The Big Hero 6 team decided to create a virtual tour of the cities in the form of a video, focusing on the theme of “bike & beer”. The students made recordings, chose the background music and edited the video together. Some of the other teams had videos, too, for the final output, but there were also other genres such as an online magazine, a blog, or an Instagram account. More informa-

tion about the project is available in my blog post (Háhn 2020) and in the webinar where my colleagues (Katarzyna Radke and Ivonne Dekker) and I presented this VE together with student participants (Radke, Háhn & Dekker, 2020).

However, creating a multimodal product is not without challenges. Decisions need to be made on the topic, the genre, and the digital tool. The collaborators should also make a plan about the division of labor and the schedule. In most Virtual Exchanges, the process of joint creation is loaded with negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or stress (Háhn 2021b). The groups have to work by a deadline, which can be hard for many since the members do not know each other well and can communicate only online. The creation of a multimodal product usually involves the use of a digital tool that might be new to some students. The differences in digital literacies, (English) language skills, motivation, and academic timetables can also generate tension, but overcoming these issues in a group is one of the main learning outcomes of Virtual Exchange. The teachers can help the students by providing opportunities for opening up and discussing the challenges and offering tips and advice on how to overcome them.

In the final stage of the exchange, the participants are usually asked to reflect on the VE experience and share their thoughts and feelings. The final assignments can include multimodal tasks. The students can, for example, create a mind map that shows their associations with Virtual Exchange (Figure 5.6), or they can draw a magnifying glass (see Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2018) to visualize the critical moments they experienced (Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.6. A student's mind map of Virtual Exchange

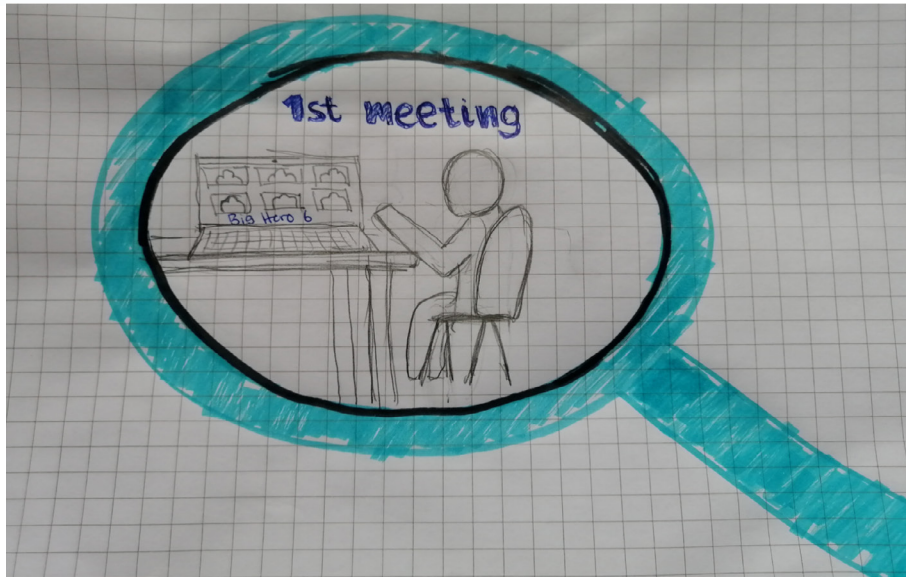


Figure 5.7.
Magnifying glass activity: drawing
of a critical moment in VE

Figure 5.6 shows a mind map that was created digitally. The main theme “Virtual Exchange” is typed in the middle of a cloud-shaped bubble that has some keywords around it, each expressing an important aspect of VE. The design is clear and gives a structured summary of the main learning outcomes, as perceived and experienced by the student. The magnifying glass in Figure 5.7 depicts the first meeting as a critical moment of the exchange. As pointed out by Háhn (2021b), many students tend to have mixed feelings about the first video call, most of them are nervous and excited at the same time. This explains why the first meeting was chosen as a critical moment by the student in the above example. Reflective multimodal tasks, such as the mind map or the magnifying glass, can be part of learning diaries or e-portfolios that the students submit at the end of the exchange.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter reviews completed collaborative VE projects with special attention to how multimodality is harnessed in such endeavors. Illustrations provided above prove the applicability of multimodal digital tools for participants’ introductions and get-to-know interactions, for facilitating joint activities and developing attractive outputs, for presentation of results and (self)evaluation of the experiences.

What makes VE projects especially useful is their potential for substituting social relations and intercultural contacts in such periods as the COVID-19 pandemic. Students, when prohibited from or afraid to enter public spaces to interact and collect materials, when stranded out of campus or in their home cities, tend to feel stressed and isolated under such circumstances. Even though the anxiety and the uncertainty resulting from the pandemic situation caused communication problems in some of the groups reported in this review, teachers asked the students to be flexible and understanding and also sent them supportive messages. It was comforting to see how much the students from different countries supported one another in their groups. Some of the VE reported here provided them with a space and an opportunity to share and relieve their fears about the pandemic.

As is common in VE projects, students not only collaborate online and produce and present results of their projects, but also can submit their reflections and feedback on the project in the form of e-portfolios. From a review of these portfolios, we could see that most of them believed that taking part in a virtual exchange was very useful from the point of view of their future working life because it helped them to develop several skills and competencies (digital literacy, team working skills, intercultural sensitivity and competence, time management, communication skills etc.). Multimodality is embedded in the effective exercise of such skills and competencies on top of its capacity for making the experience of virtual exchanges fun.

TECHNOLOGY KIT FOR VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

Platforms

- Trello <https://www.trello.com/>
- Schoology <https://www.schoology.com/>
- Google Classroom <https://classroom.google.com>
- Microsoft Teams <https://www.microsoft.com/en-ww/microsoft-teams/log-in>
- Padlet <https://padlet.com>
- Closed Facebook groups

Video meetings

- Zoom <https://zoom.us>
- Teams <https://www.microsoft.com/en-ww/microsoft-teams/log-in>
- Google Meet <https://meet.google.com>

Group interaction and collaboration

- WhatsApp
- Facebook Messenger
- Google Drive
- Slack <https://slack.com/>

Digital tools for creating and editing videos

- Viva Video <https://vivavideo.tv/>
- Filmora <https://filmora.wondershare.com/>
- Screencast-o-matic (for screen recordings) <https://screencast-o-matic.com/>

Digital tools for online magazines, brochures, and posters

- MadMagz <https://madmagz.com/>
- Canva <https://www.canva.com/>
- Piktochart <https://piktochart.com/>

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