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20

21

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Against all odds: Problem-solving as a skill critical to Virtual Exchange

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Abstract

Virtual Exchange (VE) brings together groups of learners from different geographical locations and cultural backgrounds to engage them in online intercultural collaboration and interaction. Although VE projects are designed and implemented by educators as part of the students' educational programmes, they often go beyond the setting of traditional courses offered by higher education institutions. Because of their innovative nature, VEs require the students to leave their comfort zone and think outside the box to develop new creative strategies of communication and collaboration in order to find solutions to problems that crop up in this new learning environment.

This presentation showcases the problem-solving strategies employed by the students of Creative Business (the Netherlands), Tourism (Poland) and Language Studies (Finland) who were engaged in two interdisciplinary VE projects carried out in the times of Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020 and 2021, **City break in Europe: Understanding tourists' needs and motivations** and **City exploration: Emerging tourism trends in the Covid-19 era**. During their six-week collaboration the Dutch, Polish, and Finnish students joined their forces and critically analysed the official websites of their municipalities (Utrecht, Poznań and Jyväskylä), focusing on the language, graphics, audience, marketing strategies and new attractive forms of sightseeing. As the final product, the students collaboratively designed an innovative tour of the three cities.

To reach their project goals, the students, confronted with multiple collaborative hurdles and stuck in the Covid-19 pandemic, were forced to find effective ways of dealing with the physical distance, cultural differences, varying language levels, foreign accents, disciplinary gaps, malfunctioning technology and various security measures imposed in their countries to prevent the spread of the disease. Most studies addressing the challenges of VE offer tips and recommendations for teachers on how to improve the pedagogical design of the projects. Challenges are interpreted as problems that should be minimized to make the VE experience smooth for the students. In our study, we suggest that problems are affordances or even benefits because they provide a learning experience for the participants of VE.

Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE) can be a challenging experience for the participants. Previous studies pointed out the difficulties of working in virtual teams due to the lack of face-to-face meetings (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz 2020). When communication and collaboration are limited to online platforms, the group members can find it difficult to plan, negotiate, and create something

together. Moreover, the lack of shared grounding such as group history, common experiences, and shared norms can also make collaboration problematic, as suggested by Maynad and Gilson (2014). In many cases, the participants use a foreign language (usually English) as a lingua franca, which can generate feelings of anxiety (Fondo & Jacobetty 2020), especially for those who are not fluent in the language. The diversity of socio-cultural backgrounds and digital skills can also cause challenges during the virtual exchange (Helm 2018 Hauck 2020).

In our study we focus on problem-solving as a critical skill in the context of online international collaboration. Our aim is to identify the kinds of problems students encounter in VE projects and to explore the solutions that the students themselves can offer.

The study draws on data collected from two virtual exchanges arranged among three universities in 2020 and 2021: Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland; Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands; and the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The projects were based on group work in interdisciplinary (business, tourism and languages) and international teams. The main theme in both VE-s was city tourism. The participants had to compare their municipalities' websites, collect material in their own cities and prepare a multimodal product that advertises the three cities (Poznań, Utrecht, and Jyväskylä).

Our data comprised the students' e-portfolios that they had submitted at the end of each exchange. Data was collected with the informed consent of the participants. In total, we analysed 32 e-portfolios from the 2020 and 34 from the 2021 project. We used the method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark 2006) to identify the main areas of problems that the students reported on in their writings. Our research questions were as follows:

1. What challenges did the students describe in their e-portfolios?
2. What strategies did the students apply to overcome the challenges?

We identified five main areas of challenges:

- Project management and task completion in a virtual setting;
- Communication across cultures in English as a lingua franca;
- Socializing online and collaborating with international partners;
- Use of technology for collaborative purposes;
- Impact of Covid-19.

The aspects that caused the greatest concern in the first area – that is in **project management and task completion** – were heavy workload, deadlines, varying schedules, time-zone differences and leading groups. From the start the students were required to think about how to make the tasks more manageable and how to share them in a fair way. They decided to contribute to the group effort by doing what they were best at and use the group's talents and skills most efficiently.

Many groups realized early on that they were unable to discuss all the details during their synchronous weekly meetings. They had to prepare in advance; time constraints also demanded efficiency. The faster the students coped with the duties, the more time they had for small talk and socializing. Working in shared online documents and completing tasks off-line were the most frequently adopted techniques.

To cope with time-zone differences and varying university schedules, the students decided to communicate clearly in writing and used Doodle-like applications, time-converters and online calendars. They helped them avoid ambiguities and misunderstandings. Some groups

sent funny emojis to remind their group members about the coming meetings. This way they avoided sounding dry and imposing.

Leading groups was a challenge for some of the first-time team leaders. Collaboration did not always go smoothly, and this was a cause of immense stress. What helped in those groups were direct feedback and shared documents drafted in advance where group leaders could write things down for everybody to read. Sometimes humor helped, or support given by a more experienced group member.

Using English as a lingua franca was another challenging area. The gap in language command caused a lot of tension, especially at the beginning of the VE. Less advanced students reported having a huge language barrier and were afraid to engage in conversations. On the other hand, the more advanced students were disappointed that they could not discuss things in depth.

What helped in many groups was creating a safe, friendly atmosphere. Since the Finnish students studied languages, some of them received solid pedagogical training. They used guiding questions, prolonged silence, and tried to reach out to the quiet members of their teams. In all the groups students experimented with adjusting their language, using synonyms, translation, definitions, transformations, paraphrasing, guessing, and translanguaging.

Apart from using linguistic techniques, the students resorted to various multimodal modes of communication (such as screen sharing, writing, using emoji, gifs and memes) in order to express ideas which were too complex to put into words. VE participants exploited technology and intensively explored various online tools, such as Google translate, e-dictionaries, photo-translators, and online tutors.

Socializing and online collaboration were the areas of particular anxiety, especially at the start of the VE project. The students tried to compensate for the lack of shared grounding by using various ice-breaking activities and humour. They thought of funny introductions, told jokes, chatted about everyday life, their hobbies and interests. They tried to build a sense of community.

During the first group meetings the students were encouraged by the teachers to establish group rules and design a group logo and name. Adopting a creative approach to these two tasks and using a sense of humor gave some groups a lot of fun and helped them build team spirit. Many groups spontaneously engaged in conversations about the three cultures and the Covid situation before jumping to the project tasks.

To make the students aware of stereotypical cultural perceptions, we asked them before the VE to design an intercultural survey and ask how much their local peers knew about the other three countries. They presented the findings in their international groups and had a chance to discuss the emerging stereotypes with their group members. This way they confronted the stereotypical perceptions of the three countries with the opinions held by the representatives of those nations. To overcome stereotypes in practice, the students made sure that everybody actively participated in the VE, followed the rules adopted by the team and contributed to the group effort equally.

To ensure commitment, the students used various online tools, such as Doodle, shared documents, immediate messaging systems, e.g. WhatsApp. They sent various reminders or directly addressed the disengaged teammates. Sometimes personal, one-to-one conversations were needed. The groups used reporting to teachers as the last resort. We strongly encouraged them to resolve conflicts directly in the team and offered advice on how to do it on Trello, which was our main online platform.

Use of technology was a considerable challenge before the pandemic, as many groups had not had enough experience in using online applications for group communication and collaboration. Some students found it stressful to present themselves entirely online while using a new tool (e.g. Trello). Installing and getting acquainted with new applications needed time and practice. Negotiating which tools and techniques to use was problematic in some groups, as there were conflicting preferences, so the students experimented with a few applications (such as Google meet, Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp) in order to adopt the most convenient one.

As always, the students tried to conserve energy, so at the start they tried to use the tools they had already known, particularly when producing the final product. Many groups chose Instagram – the medium they had used a lot for social purposes, but not for educational ones. Pressed for innovation, the students explored new, rarely used features of Instagram. They added sound, video, quizzes and developed educational stories.

They transferred skills from one tool to another. For example, those who knew Zoom were able to quickly adapt to Teams. This experience gave them a chance to compare various features of online applications and learn on the way how to best utilize them. The students spontaneously searched the net to find tutorials and discovered that they could do more than they initially believed they would be able to achieve.

To our immense joy, the students shared their expertise and helped one another by using screen sharing techniques, sending URL addresses to the best tutorials, or simply guiding their teammates online, with patience and empathy. All these challenges built trust, group reliance and empathy.

The most disturbing challenge was **the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic**. It wreaked havoc at universities in March and April 2020 when our students engaged in the VE project were supposed to go to town and record footage of city life. Suddenly strict sanitary regulations prevented them from doing it. So, they faced a huge challenge: how to do the project?

What we observed at that time was mutual support present in most of the groups. The students realized early on that they had to adopt an alternative approach – use photos and videos stored on their digital devices, share resources with their friends, search the net for material offered on free licenses. They had a quick lesson on copyrights, too.

Some groups completely changed the format of the final product. They communicated more intensively and often needed to renegotiate the initial workload division. This was a very intense time and required good negotiation skills combined with extended empathy.

The groups which went through this period successfully developed very strong bonds and kept communicating after the project ended. During our closing video-conference there was a sense of community, and some students even regretted the project was coming to an end.

The **comparison of the VE projects** of 2020 and 2021 resulted in some interesting aspects in the context of the five key themes identified, namely: 1) project management and task completion, 2) communication across cultures in English as a lingua franca, 3) online socializing and collaboration with international partners, 4) the use of technology for collaborative purposes, and 5) the impact of COVID-19. For the first three themes no significant differences emerged in the findings. As far as the use of technology and the impact of COVID-19 is concerned, some interesting differences emerged over the two-year period.

Firstly, there was a significant increase in both expertise and confidence as far as the use of media platforms and channels is concerned. The students were more adept at communicating with a diversity of media for different purposes, as outlined earlier in this paper. This can in part be attributed to the global lockdowns experienced with the rise of COVID-19. Furthermore, there

was a decrease in the level of anxiety and disruption in everyday life caused by the COVID pandemic. For many this has become part of daily life globally and served as a common discussion factor amongst the groups.

Overall, it can be concluded that both projects (2020 and 2021) were successful in terms of students overcoming challenges experienced during the projects. Aspects that contributed towards the successful solving of problems by students include amongst others:

- providing a solid foundation and framework (clear course structure, clear weekly instructions, regular feedback and reflection);
- effective communication spheres (platforms and channels to facilitate effective online communication);
- letting students cope with challenges and offering support where necessary;
- giving students ownership of the project and letting them identify and solve problems on their own;
- and finally letting them experience satisfaction and savor victory by participating in an online exhibition where they displayed their products and commented on those made by other teams.

Dealing with and finding solutions to problems are invaluable experiences as they can motivate students to mobilize their resources and rise to the challenge, make them think outside the box to remedy the situation, help them gain flexibility and improve their time management skills. Overcoming problems together leads to greater cultural sensitivity, develops students' negotiation skills and improves the ability to look at things from a different perspective. Success at problem solving can build perseverance. Therefore, it can be concluded that problems are not to be prevented at all costs. In many cases, students can find solutions themselves, which is a useful learning experience.

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