

16 Communication across cultures: when the virtual meets the classroom

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Abstract

This chapter showcases the implementation of an E+VE (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange) project in a ‘broadening module’ (elective content-specific modules offered across the university curricula) at the University of Limerick (UL), entitled ‘Communication Across Cultures’. The pedagogical approach follows a blended learning model where face-to-face lectures are combined with the *Cultural Encounters* programme series of iOOCs (interactive Open Online Courses) offered by E+VE. This pedagogical practice has received positive feedback due to the practical appropriateness and effectiveness of the VE to the module, and has also been successful in terms of intercultural awareness and learning, in addition to the development of intercultural competence and communication skills.

Keywords: intercultural communication, Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges, internationalisation, intercultural learning, intercultural awareness.

1. Context of implementation

The broadening module ‘Communication across cultures’, one of the elective content-specific modules offered across the university curricula, strongly aligns

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with the UL (n.d.) strategic goal of internationalisation which, among other objectives, aims at “embedding global perspectives into the curriculum [and] fostering cross-cultural competencies” (p. 24). This module offers students

“an opportunity to engage in learning about language and intercultural communication. In our increasingly multicultural and multilingual society, communities and organisations are faced with a number of difficult challenges as they strive to provide a respectful, safe and harmonious environment for all. It is crucial that students have opportunities to understand and appreciate their own culture and make connections to appreciate the cultures and experiences of others”².

When we first started the design of ‘Communication across cultures’ in 2017, it was decided that a VE element would be part of the course in order to include both a practical and an experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) dimension. The idea was to build upon our knowledge and expertise in telecollaborative practices with language students in the school of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics (MLAL) at UL (Batardière et al., 2019; Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016). Some language modules in Spanish, German, and French within MLAL include online tandem learning practices as part of the curriculum to prepare students linguistically and interculturally for their period abroad. What began as an individual and anecdotal practice is becoming an established part of our language modules, developing expertise among our staff on VEs and bringing awareness of the benefits of such pedagogical practices.

Coincidentally, at the time of developing the aforementioned module, the European initiative E+VE³ was launched, providing the possibility of integrating ready-made options such as iOOCs into university courses. Therefore, we decided to follow a blended learning model and extend face-to-face lectures with one such interactive online course. This approach to VEs is a ‘service-provider approach’, where a non-profit organisation provides academic content, online

2. https://www.ul.ie/international/sites/default/files/user_media/Autum%202020%20Module%20Booklet.pdf

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

discussions, and engagement in collaborative research through the medium of English as a *lingua franca* (O’Dowd, 2018). The aim of ‘service-provider approach’ VEs is to promote intercultural awareness and develop employability skills such as critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, team-work, collaboration, and digital literacies.

The UL students participating in the VE represent different disciplines (social sciences, languages, economics, and politics) and nationalities (Irish students and Erasmus international students from Europe and outside Europe). The first programme that our students took part in was being offered in 2018 by the non-profit organisation Sharing Perspectives Foundation (SPF)⁴, one of the E+VE consortium partners, and was entitled: ‘European refuge/es: cultivating diversity together’. Since then, UL students have participated in subsequent courses offered by SPF: ‘Newcomers and nationalism: exploring the challenges of belonging in diverse societies’ and ‘Perspectives on populism’. It may be noted that the titles of the E+VE programmes in the *Cultural Encounters* strand give a firm idea of the topics and contents covered therein. By bringing together young people in Europe and the southern Mediterranean area, the *Cultural Encounters* courses initiate, stimulate, and facilitate international and intercultural dialogue and collaboration to foster skills, knowledge and open attitudes among students, in this case through VEs.

In this chapter we will be using the terms course, programme, seminar, and VE to refer to different things. Some clarifying definitions may be useful to be able to distinguish the different components of our case study. Course and programme refer to the courses that SPF offers within E+VE. Module is used in the context of the courses that UL offers to their students, in our case, referring to the broadening module ‘Communication across cultures’. The term VE is used when talking about the online cultural exchanges that take place among the students and the weekly seminar is the two hour mediated session which the participants in the E+VE programme need to attend.

4. <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/>

2. Aims and description of the VE

The ‘Communication across cultures’ module brings the concept of intercultural learning (Bennett, 2009) alive into the students experience making them critically aware of the crucial role that language and culture have in intercultural communication.

To this end, the module aims at developing the students’ intercultural awareness as “a conscious understanding of the role of culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication” (Baker, 2012, p. 73).

Our module “explores views of identity, culture, and intercultural communication including the role of language. Students reflect on their own cultural identities and how these might have informed their interpretations of the ‘other’”⁵. The second part of the module is the practical part where the students participate in the programme offered by SPF. This provides them with opportunities to achieve some of the learning outcomes, i.e. demonstrate and practise skills of intercultural communicative competence (Fantini, 2019), cultural and intercultural awareness, and deepen their understanding of people from different cultural backgrounds in real life situations. Both aims of the module fit effectively with the programme that SPF offers.

Following this framework, the module is taught using a blended learning approach, which combines traditional face-to-face lectures with online delivery (see Table 1). The *Cultural Encounters* programme is the online learning component, which has a VE component that allows students to actively engage in communication with students of other cultures. The module aims at equipping students with the know-how for engaging with real world intercultural problems, encouraging them to be socially responsible citizens and making a positive difference.

5. https://www.ul.ie/international/sites/default/files/user_media/Autumn%202020%20Module%20Booklet.pdf

Table 1. Summary of the face-to-face component and the online delivery component

FACE-TO-FACE	ONLINE DELIVERY/VE
Total duration: 12 weeks	Total duration: ten weeks
Delivered: Lecturer	Delivered: SPF
Two hour lecture per week	Two hour online mediated sessions plus other activities
Objectives and learning outcomes	Objectives and learning outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problematising definitions of culture and language in intercultural communication, especially in global lingua franca communication contexts. • Reflect on, describe and clarify the configuration of cultural identities in intercultural communication, including your own. • Define intercultural competency in terms of empathy, cultural adaptability, cultural relativisation, negotiation, and mediation. • Illustrate, contrast, and explain differences in both verbal and nonverbal communication in and across different cultures, as emergent resources in intercultural communication. • Make connections between theories of intercultural communication and your own intercultural experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have meaningful, transnational, and intercultural experiences. • Increase intercultural awareness and build 21st Century skills through VE. • Encourage and promote intercultural dialogue, employability, and citizenship, strengthening the youth dimension of the EU neighbourhood policy (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/overview_en). • Develop soft skills that are often not formally recognised, such as the development of intercultural awareness, digital literacies, group work, etc. • Learn through dialogue where participants will be seeking mutual understanding and co-creating knowledge, based on their own experiences.

The duration of the module is 12 weeks and the students meet every week for two hours when attending the lecture. During this face-to-face time, the students are presented with theoretical issues related to interculturality which they discuss and engage in a debate following a critical approach. The conceptual approach in the intercultural studies discipline is complemented by their ten week compulsory participation in the *Cultural Encounters* programme in order to receive academic credit for the module. This VE and face-to-face combination

bridges theory and practice, by making the virtual cultural encounters a venue for dialogue and exchange.

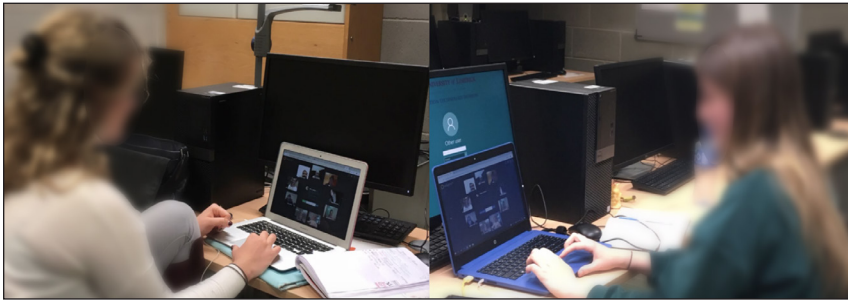
3. Activities and tools

Before the start of the VE, the students are provided with the necessary information and instructions regarding their participation. After registration for the VE programme, they have the option to follow a preparatory and exploratory session allowing them to become familiar with the virtual interface of the platform to be used. Throughout the semester they have technical, academic and pastoral support from the E+VE programme staff and from their lecturer at UL. Students need to complete a minimum of 70% of the weekly group-based online seminars and must engage with the different elements: video lectures, responses to video lectures, video dialogue assignments, and a weekly reflective journal. The latter is recorded in a Google form provided to each student at the end of the online seminar to allow them to write reflectively about the different opinions, perspectives, intercultural (mis-)understandings or simply the content of the seminar that are part of the course provided by SPF. Equally, the lecturer and coordinator of the module can monitor the participation and engagement of the students in the E+VE as SPF provides accurate and detailed reports about the levels of student participation and engagement.

The online dialogue interactions among the students from different European and Southern Mediterranean universities take place once a week (see [Figure 1](#)). The UL students choose a suitable time for engagement and dedicate two hours per week over a period of ten weeks to carry out the VEs. The online sessions do not coincide with face-to-face class sessions, therefore rooms in the UL library (quiet and well equipped spaces) or computer labs where Wi-Fi is guaranteed, are available for the students to use. The technical requirements to carry out the VEs are limited to internet accessibility, preferably from a laptop. However, some students choose to take part in the weekly online

seminars using their mobile phones. The technical assistance offered by the support team at SPF has always been acknowledged by students as being very helpful, prompt, and responsive, as well as offering excellent academic, and organisational support.

Figure 1. Two UL students participating in the E+VE offered by SPF



In relation to the language used within the online exchanges, a considerable number of UL participants are native speakers of English. This is often perceived as a positive challenge as it brings awareness of the strong link between language and culture, as one student said:

“feeling comfortable sharing my opinion was sometimes a challenge. Also, adjusting the way I spoke and the certain way [we] say things so that I wouldn’t offend and could be understood by non-native English speakers”.

Erasmus students and international students felt that participation in the VE through the medium of English is a very valuable opportunity to keep practising English while discussing and reflecting on socio-political issues. However, sometimes these students could feel at a disadvantage or not linguistically competent enough to articulate complex ideas during the discussions, as another student mentioned: “it was difficult to speak about those topics that are quite technical in a language that is not my own”.

4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

As discussed in the previous sections, the VE is completely integrated into the module ‘Communication across cultures’. The evaluation of student performance is twofold: for the online exchange offered by E+VE, SPF provides different assessment mechanisms: attendance and participation in the online dialogue sessions, completion of the video lecture responses, video dialogue assignments, and a weekly reflective journal. All these assessment components amount to 60% of the final student grade. For the face-to-face component, the lecturer of the module asks the students to write a final reflective essay based on their experience of the VE. The students have already been completing entries in a weekly reflective journal, submitted to SPF through a Google Form; this is designed to allow them to think back and consider on an individual basis their weekly experiences on the programme. When writing the final reflective essay, students can include anecdotes and observations recorded in their weekly reflective journal (see Section 3 of this case study). The final reflective assignment is worth 40% of their total grade and they need to analyse critically the whole experience of participating in the VE, and include some of the theory and concepts covered during the lectures when and where relevant.

In recent iterations of the module, a high percentage of the students were taking the module as an alternative or preparation for the Erasmus physical mobility. In those cases, the students are asked to reflect on how the VE can help them develop some of the intercultural skills they would be using if they were participating in the physical mobility or how the VE is helping them prepare for their period abroad.

During the implementation of E+VE, feedback from students is collected using an anonymous survey and their final reflective essays. Overall, the participants agree that taking part in the E+VE programme helps them to think more critically, share different views about the same topic (e.g. immigration, populism, nationalism, and identity) and broaden their consideration of other perspectives. Here are some representative student views: “[VEs] taught me to think about other perspectives”, “showed the importance of being informed of

global news”, “encouraged us to think critically”, and “challenged the views of the other participants”.

Participating in online intercultural exchanges to discuss topics related to Europe and society in general represents a very different pedagogy for the students to develop learning. It must be reported that initially, it appears to them as a very unfamiliar and atypical approach. As one of the students observes:

“the VE programme brought about a very different method of learning about society and culture. It introduced an aspect of learning that the typical academic student would not normally associate with their academic progression in university”.

The majority of students agree that the VE fits effectively within the aims of the module, and adds practical and experiential aspects to their learning processes. In [Table 2](#), there are several quotations that refer to this student perception of the VE as the experiential side of their academic module. The comments also illustrate the impact that participating in *Cultural Encounters* had on some of the students: growing awareness of global issues, strong engagement and action, development of multiple perspectives, and the development of soft skills important in intercultural and cross-cultural communication (i.e. active listening).

Table 2. Examples of experiential learning and the impact that VE had on students

Selected comments of the students (our highlights in bold)
<p>Comment 1: “Although you hear of this [traumatic news]in the newspapers or online, it doesn’t become real until you have seen and spoken to someone going through it”.</p>
<p>Comment 2: “Using my group as an example, we took it upon ourselves to make a Facebook group so that we can all stay in contact if we so wish and I believe that the Spanish students are helping A., the Syrian student, in finding scholarships to master’s degree programmes in Europe and in Canada. All this after just ten weeks of knowing each other”.</p>

Comment 3:

“Our facilitator M., often asked us to say our favourite words in our native languages as an ice breaker. To which R. (one of the participants in the group the student was part of) once responded with the word حب /ħaʕbæn/, meaning love in Arabic. **I began to develop an interest in the Arabic language and began learning the language on my own.** R. was amused by my desire to learn her mother tongue, then **she offered to help me**”.

Comment 4:

“This was what I liked the most about the VE programme: I realised that **my point of view was not the only one**, and that what I saw as normal was not like that for others. **For example**, people from Gaza only had three hours of electricity per day”.

Comment 5:

“In the first couple of weeks in my group some of us were coming close to blows just because of this thing about **listening, the process of learning how to listen** we were still getting there so at the start of the week there was a bit of tension about some certain topics that we weren’t listening to properly”.

Receiving a digital badge is a very welcome addition for many students, especially for those who enrol in our module as an alternative to Erasmus mobility. The badge guarantees them recognition for their multicultural experience after participating in the VE and their competencies in communicating effectively and carrying out discussions in a culturally diverse setting.

5. Lessons learnt and conclusion

Taking into consideration the pedagogical and learning outcomes, VE has offered the opportunity to our institution to develop internationalisation strategies by ‘globalising the curriculum’ (De Wit, 2016; Helm, 2015) and practise ‘internationalisation at home’. The journey so far has been very positive and the students’ feedback shows how their attitudes have shifted and their perspectives have broadened due to the blended learning model. In other words, the students’ intercultural awareness and intercultural communication skills are enhanced. It should be highlighted that these gains and achievements form part of the essential learning objectives of the module and of the programme offered by SPF.

Issues related to student workload and time management have been raised from time to time to the extent that they might have a negative impact on student engagement. Consequently, some of the allocated face-to-face time has been reduced in order to offer students equitable opportunities with the credits gained.

Some technical problems were also present in the exchanges, which have always been overcome by the technical support team of the VE provider SPF. The types of students that take part in the VEs change from year to year as our module is a broadening module that is offered across the entire university. Every year some minor adjustments need to be applied when working in collaboration with SPF. Every iteration of the programme brings changes, challenges, but also opportunities to build bridges among people and cultures.

The digital era has undoubtedly brought the world closer to us, however, conversely within this global space, our mind-set and our digital practices could become very localised and limited to leisure and entertainment, potentially leading to the harmful growth of homophily and the *balkanisation* of our ideas and cultural practices (Currarini, Matheson, & Vega-Redondo, 2016; Yardi & Boyd, 2010). We are currently operating in an educational context at UL in which the vast majority of students display less and less engagement with socio-political and global issues in favour of more local and regional concerns (Murray & Giralt, 2019). VE brings the world to our classes, to our students – as mentioned by one of them: “I have not spoken much to foreign people before as I have not had the opportunity” – and affords future citizens the opportunity to open their minds, develop their intercultural skills, and become better prepared for a changing and diverse planet.

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