

6 The practical realities of virtual exchange

Sandra Healy¹ and Olivia Kennedy²

Abstract

This chapter examines practical issues regarding Virtual Exchanges (VEs) for educational purposes in the university context and covers language use, cultural differences, time management, teacher collaboration, technology-related issues, assessment, and context specific factors. It charts the establishment of three academic collaborations between a university in Kyoto, Japan, and institutions in Asia, Africa, and Europe. The first collaboration follows a new hybrid model created at the Japanese university described here. In the Teaching Online Together (TOT) model, teachers in the Philippines interact with students in a tutorial style system to improve the students' English presentation skills via video conferencing. The second project, with a university in Kenya, is modelled on the intercultural telecollaboration or Cultura-type exchange approach (O'Dowd, 2018). Students from the respective institutions work together asynchronously to complete tasks related to the development of intercultural understanding and sensitivity. The third collaboration, with a university in Belgium, follows a shared syllabus approach (O'Dowd, 2018) in which teachers create course materials for students who then work together both synchronously and asynchronously to achieve their goals.

Keywords: virtual exchange, telecollaboration, teaching online together, TOT, developing intercultural sensitivity, online collaboration.

1. Kyoto Institute of Technology, Kyoto, Japan; sandyhealy26@googlemail.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4387-259X>

2. Nagahama Institute of Bioscience and Technology, Shiga, Japan; o_kennedy@nagahama-i-bio.ac.jp; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0144-2516>

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1. Introduction

VE, or ‘telecollaboration’ as it is also known in the sphere of foreign language learning, describes the online interactions of learners, or groups of learners, in different contexts who collaborate as part of their education. Teachers from all over the globe, in different teaching environments and with different educational goals, have engaged in very diverse approaches to VE and this has led to the development of an enormous variety of projects. Because of this diversity, no model has dominated, which in turn has given educators the freedom to creatively address the different needs of their learners (O’Dowd, 2017). This chapter will describe the establishment of three individual VEs taking place between the university in Japan where the two authors of this chapter teach, and institutions in three other countries. It will explore the process of setting up these telecollaborations and some issues to be aware of when embarking on such projects.

2. Background

Various VE models have been developed and are divided into three approaches by O’Dowd (2018): subject-specific, shared syllabus, and service-provider. The first approach can be further divided into exchanges that are grounded in foreign language learning and those that are from business studies. The eTandem model is one of the oldest examples of this first approach to VE. In this model, students from different linguistic backgrounds are partnered together in order to learn one another’s language. Developed from a long history of learners pairing up formally and informally in the years before such mediating technology existed, the first documented computer-mediated exchange occurred between Ruhr-Universität Bochum and the University of Rhode Island (Brammerts, 1996). Because the focus of eTandem learning is often the development of language skills, much of the research in this area is in the field of second language acquisition and explores linguistic development (O’Rourke, 2007).

Another model that falls under the subject-specific approach is the Cultura model which was first used in an exchange between a French language class

at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and an English class at the National Higher French Institute of Aeronautics and Space (SUPAERO) in Toulouse, France (Furstenberg, 1998). It was later further developed at MIT by Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Maillet (2001) and used in English. As the name suggests, Cultura model exchanges focus on the intercultural aspects of VE. Projects using this model often require students to compare and contrast different areas of culture from the students' respective countries. The dual goals of the Cultura model are to improve both intercultural competence and students' linguistic ability.

In recent years, shared syllabus approaches, in which teachers from different educational institutions collaborate to provide their students with opportunities to work on shared content, have become common. These types of exchanges enable students to learn about their subject area from differing cultural perspectives while also developing their intercultural communication skills and language skills (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008). One of the most well-known models of the shared syllabus approach is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) which was developed at the State University of New York (SUNY) network of universities (Rubin, 2016). Classes of students studying similar subjects are connected and work together on materials that instructors from both universities have developed. The emphasis on content and the different cultural interpretations that people from different countries bring to the collaboration are the difference between this and other approaches.

The third approach described by O'Dowd (2018) is the service-provider approach which refers to projects created by organizations rather than individual teachers. One of the first examples was the New York/Moscow Schools Telecommunications Project which was set up in 1988 to connect young people from the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War to discuss socio-political issues (Helm, 2018). The goals of this initiative are still relevant today and can be seen in the Erasmus+VE project, launched in 2018, which endeavors to connect young people in Europe with those in the Southern Mediterranean. iEARN (iearn.org) and Soliya (soliya.net), which connects students from the US and Europe and

the Arab and/or Muslim worlds to help them develop friendships and deepen their understanding of one another are other well-known examples of the service-provider approach.

3. Case study

3.1. Participants

The authors of this chapter both teach English as a foreign language at a national university in Kyoto, Japan, where the students are studying either science and technology or architecture and design. The majority of the students continue onto graduate programs, and from there either move into academia, or take up research positions in companies, both domestic and international. As such, the need for strong communicative abilities, both in terms of language skills and intercultural awareness, is recognized to be of importance by both the students themselves, and the university administration. All domestic students have previously studied English as a foreign language for six years, in junior and senior high school, and their resulting English ability is assessed early in their first semester on campus. At the start of the programs described here, they had an average Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score of 570.

3.2. Project description

The three VE initiatives described here are currently being undertaken in the English department. They are mainly classroom-based, with all of the synchronous work and a large percentage of the asynchronous work occurring during class-time. Students are required to prepare outside of this time so as to be ready for interchanges with their distant learning partners.

The students at the Japanese institution use a class set of iPad tablets for synchronous work that have been preloaded with the Skype application and their own devices, mainly laptop computers, for asynchronous work. The collaborators in Belgium, the Philippines, and Kenya use a combination of

computers and mobile devices. Technological issues have been rare, and mainly relate to unstable Wi-Fi. Careful contingency planning for when such problems occur means that any repercussions can be minimized.

3.2.1. *TOT*

The first exchange underway at the university is a collaboration with an online English conversation school based in the Philippines and is the longest running exchange we are involved in. It does not follow any of the traditional models and was developed for our specific context in a Japanese university. We named this new model TOT. TOT combines elements of traditional tutorial style learning with the service-provider approach. In this approach, learners do not connect with other learners. Instead, small groups of students in one country, Japan, are connected with teachers in another country, the Philippines. Instructors in our university collaborate with instructors in the other institution, teaching online together. The advantages that this approach has provided to both our university and to the institution in the Philippines will be discussed in more detail below.

The exchange benefits from the fact that many English language schools based in the Philippines now provide online conversation lessons to people in Japan. The number of Japanese learners choosing such virtual conversation classes has increased rapidly recently (Tajima, 2018) because of their convenience, flexibility, and affordability. The VE described in this section is based on a relationship with such a school called QQEnglish (qqeng.com), and we have been working together for more than five years. The exchange is classroom-based and focuses on improving the presentation skills of the Japanese undergraduate students. It mirrors a traditional tutorial classroom where students work in small groups with teachers. The students engage in four VE sessions using Skype during the autumn semester and work in small groups with a Filipino teacher. All are assigned roles and take turns presenting, timing, recording, and evaluating one another as well as taking part in group discussions with the online teacher. These four online sessions are an integral part of the curriculum, with much of the remaining 12 weekly lessons devoted to preparing and practicing for them.

3.2.2. *Cultura-type exchange*

The second collaboration is an exchange with university students in Kenya. This small exchange is based on the Cultura model. Master's level students in Kyoto engage with undergraduate students in Kenya both synchronously and asynchronously and exchange information on issues related to culture in order for students on both sides of the exchange to develop intercultural competence. The course consists of three tasks. The first of these is the exploration of 'Cicada' by Shaun Tan (2018), an Australian writer and illustrator. This picture book is aimed at older readers and is written in simple English. It was chosen due to the low linguistic load that it provides, while providing a good starting place to discuss both human rights and human relations. Because the main character is a cicada rather than a human, the text is racially and culturally neutral, and allows students to explore the themes of racism, discrimination, acceptance, self-worth, and the place of work in our lives. The second task the students are asked to do also focuses on literature, but this time students choose a story to share that they feel is representative of their own country. They discuss why they chose it and the different meanings that could be ascribed to it with their VE partners. The final task is to create a digital story in a medium of their choice. Themes in these student-produced stories connect to the concepts introduced in the course such as collective/individualistic societies, high/low context cultures, monochronic/polychronic attitudes toward time, and verbal/nonverbal language. By telling their own stories, students reach a further, deeper level of understanding of these concepts and how they function in different cultures.

3.2.3. *Shared syllabus approach*

The third VE project is our most recent undertaking and is a shared syllabus collaboration with a university in Belgium. The language teachers from both these universities met at a computer assisted language learning conference in Europe and started working together on the VE project. Initially, we hoped to include content teachers in a central role, however this proved difficult and so the exchange has instead been established between language teachers who have students from the same discipline, in this case architecture. The process of

negotiating and setting up the exchange took place over a two year period and included visits from both institutions to their partner institution.

3.3. Issues in VE

Creating VEs is an exciting opportunity for both teachers and students to connect with peers around the world and the potential benefits are numerous. A large body of research documents the development of linguistic skills (Guth & Marini-Maio, 2010; Polisca, 2011), intercultural communication skills (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Hoffstaedter & Kohn, 2015), critical thinking skills (Von Der Emde, Schneider, & Kötter, 2001), digital literacy skills (Helm, 2014) and multiliteracies (Guth & Helm, 2011). Multiliteracies is a concept that expands traditional views of language learning and literacy to recognize and encompass the variety of linguistic and cultural differences that have become part of our world due to globalization and increased diversification (Guth & Helm, 2011). However, the process of setting up exchanges also involves a variety of issues that need to be addressed, and forethought in these areas can increase both efficacy and efficiency. Issues covered in this section include language use, cultural differences, time management, teacher collaboration, technology-related issues, assessment, and context-specific factors.

3.4. Issues to be aware of surrounding the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

It is important that all participants who take part in VE understand its aims and parameters before meeting their online learning partners. An important consideration to make clear to learners is the language of the proposed exchange. When the exchange will follow the eTandem model, for example, the two languages being practiced will be the focus, and participants will work together specifically on language. In other models, however, it has become increasingly common for VEs to use ELF.

In ELF contexts, an adherence to Native English Speaker (NES) standards is not required as long as interlocutors understand one another. This is very different

from the experiences of most Japanese learners of English. In the Japanese national education system, students between the ages of 13 and 18 study a program of English largely based on NES norms, and which emphasizes the superiority of linguistic accuracy over fluency. Many Japanese students and their teachers therefore lack the ability to communicate effectively with international students (D'Angelo, 2018). Japanese students report having low motivation to learn languages and an overall lack of confidence in their linguistic capabilities and these low levels of self-esteem may be related to an over-reliance on NES norms (Yujobo, 2019). It is important, therefore, for students to be guided toward an image of themselves as language users acting on a global stage to replace their present self-image as failed language learners. Using VE can help build students' self-esteem and help them to understand the changing role of ELF as a valid and valuable tool in the globalized world. Once learners are immersed in the VE, many find the use of ELF means that they feel less anxious than they would communicating with a native speaker of the language. Guarda (2013) found similar results.

This change toward the use and acknowledgment of ELF reflects the effects of globalization and worldwide changes in the usage of and attitudes toward English. The nexus of English has moved from the centrality of native speakers to encompass wider communities, and ELF can be “defined functionally by its use in intercultural communication rather than formally by its reference to native-speaker norms” (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, & Seidlhofer, 2008, p. 27). A consequence of this is a sense of ownership of the language by different communities, which is reflected in the way English has become ‘multiplex’ (Sergeant, 2012), meaning that English no longer has one center, for example the United Kingdom, that shapes the language and its usage, but rather has many different centers located in different communities around the world. As such, the usage of ELF moves toward addressing issues of cultural imperialism. In the past, some efforts at internationalization have been seen as neo-colonialist because the competencies of one group or culture have been valued more highly than those of another (Stier, 2006). By using ELF, the contributions of all participants can be more easily recognized as having equal value.

3.5. Issues surrounding language proficiency

ELF is the language used to teach, coordinate, and develop the exchanges and is also the language the learners use in the three VEs described here. In the Philippines, English is an official language and so the online teachers based there have high levels of linguistic proficiency. Some of the coordinators are Japanese, but this does not pose a problem as all the coordinators have extensive knowledge of both English and Japanese. The exchange with the university in Kenya follows a similar pattern as English is also an official language, and is used as the language of instruction in the education system from grade four onwards (Mose, 2018). The official languages in Belgium are Dutch, French, and German, but because all the coordinators and teachers have very high levels of English proficiency there are no issues related to language difficulties at an organizational or teaching level.

Differing communication styles have occasionally brought misunderstandings. One example of this is the way that Japanese speakers often include brief periods of silence in spoken discourse which may be unfamiliar to speakers of other languages. Some research describes the Japanese as using “implicit and non-direct forms of communication” like silence (McDaniel, Samovar, & Porter, 2003, p. 255) which may be uncomfortable for people used to different communicative styles. As a result of this dissonance, the participants sometimes responded using high involvement strategies to fill the silence and in turn the Japanese interlocutors found this upsetting. By identifying these issues, by offering reassurance and guidance, and through the use of multimodal communication, these communication difficulties can be somewhat ameliorated.

Perceived differences in linguistic proficiency are important for the students. Many of the Japanese students reported feeling nervous and anxious before the exchange that they were to take part in began, believing the level of their English to be insufficient for the activities proposed. They soon discovered their fears were unfounded, however, and many expressed relief and happiness at being able to be understood by their interlocutors. In order for this to occur it is of vital

importance that teachers create tasks that the students from both of the countries in the exchange can achieve successfully.

3.6. Cultural issues to be aware of when establishing a VE

VE can be a way for students who are unable to take part in study abroad programs because of financial or personal reasons to experience communication with people from other countries. For many of the students at the university described in this chapter, it is the first time they have interacted at length autonomously, or semi-autonomously, with a person from another country. A large number report that the experience was important to them for this reason. Some examples of comments from students, included here verbatim, include: “This was a precious experience”; “This was the first time to talk to a foreign person. I had fun”; and “I am fun speaking English, before I hate[d] it”; “Why didn’t we do this in the first semester too?”.

This lack of experience with intercultural exchange means that students are often ill-prepared to confront the realities of working with people from other cultures. Japan is often viewed as a largely homogenous society with a unique culture and separate from the rest of the world (Liddicoat, 2007, 2013). This perspective results in a certain lack of knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of people from other countries, and also in an almost fatalistic belief that people from separate countries cannot understand one another. Without the knowledge that people from different cultural backgrounds view the world very differently, learners taking part in VE can potentially form damaging opinions of their distant learning partners that must be addressed if an exchange is to be beneficial to learners. One way to do this is by providing guidance, including careful introductions combined with ongoing self-reflection and feedback throughout the process. For example, in the exchange with the Filipino teachers, the Japanese students are introduced to cultural relativism through studying the basic principles of Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions and examining the ideas of cultural essentialism and are asked to reflect on their own understandings of the interactions they take part in in ongoing learning journals. One telling example of cultural dissonance was revealed when the Japanese students were asked

to find three examples of interaction between people from the two nations in preparation for their first interaction with the Filipino instructors. The goal was to create positive connections for the students between the two countries. Many students were shocked, however, to learn that Japan had invaded the Philippines during the Second World War and their research led them to explore events such as the Bataan Death March. They had not previously considered that people in the Philippines may hold anything other than positive feelings toward Japan. Supporting students as they learn about such disturbing information is important and activities need to be designed to acknowledge both past difficulties and cooperation between nations. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that increased intercultural competence will develop automatically. [Boehm, Aniola-Jedrzejek, and Kurthen \(2010\)](#) have warned that instructors, institutions, and researchers have been overly optimistic as to how much intercultural awareness is achieved through VE without specific intercultural guidance.

3.7. Issues surrounding time

Time is an important factor in all VEs. Firstly, depending on the countries that the exchange is taking place between, there may be a significant time difference. This needs to be taken into account when considering whether the exchange will be synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of the two. Our exchange with the Philippines is synchronous because there is only one-hour time difference between the two countries. Between Kenya and Japan, however, there is a six-hour difference, and between Belgium and Japan, seven. This means that synchronous sessions have to be held in the morning in Kenya and Belgium and in the late afternoon in Japan which has caused scheduling conflicts for teachers, students, and all of the universities involved. As such, in these two exchanges, much of the communication between partners is asynchronous, with partners on each side communicating and responding at a convenient time as they prepare in the lead up to synchronous sessions which take place on Skype, BigBlueButton, a web conferencing system designed for online learning, or Zoom.

In addition, universities in different countries follow different academic schedules. When class is in session in one country, students in another are deep

in summer internships or on holiday break. While the Belgian academic year begins in September, Japanese students begin in April, meaning that while the students on one side of the exchange are settled into university life, the students on the other are only just starting out as university students. They are therefore not ready for the challenges that VE can bring. Examination periods also fall at very different times, and the intense periods of preparation that precede them are not suitable for VE. The fact that participants are busy at different times of the year causes many logistical challenges.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, setting up and running VEs is extremely time-consuming for all involved. This burden on the teachers involved has until recently been largely unrecognized by institutions with little or no extra preparation time allocated. Many teachers, passionate about the potential benefits of VE, presently spend this time as a labor of love (Helm, 2015).

3.8. Issues to be aware of in teacher collaboration

Collaboration between teachers is at the heart of VE, and in order for projects to be successful, good relationships are essential. To build such relationships takes time, effort, patience, and determination from all involved, but without them, projects soon collapse. The dynamics between the staff involved in the three projects described here are all different, but all are based in a mutual respect and the understanding that all members want the best for the students in their care.

Of the three exchanges described here, the Philippine exchange is progressing the most smoothly largely because QQEnglish is a private company and therefore works differently to a traditional educational institution. Because roles are clearly defined, there is little need for negotiation. While the teachers in Japan control the project in terms of overall design, content of lessons, methods of instruction, activities to be undertaken, and types of assessment to be carried out, the staff in the Philippines are consulted as to their recommendations. Materials developed in Japan are shared with the teachers in the Philippines, and their suggestions for improvements implemented. Korthagen's (1985) five phase ALACT method of professional reflection is constantly in progress. The acronym

ALACT describes a cyclical approach which moves through five stages, firstly action, secondly reflecting on the action, thirdly developing an awareness of the important aspects of the action, fourthly developing alternative actions and finally trialing the new action, at which point the cycle begins again. Feedback from the Filipino teachers has been invaluable in improving the exchange, and each iteration of the course improves upon the one before it.

This relationship has resulted in a number of benefits for both partners. First, it has led to other kinds of collaboration in different educational contexts (not covered in this chapter) that are beneficial to both organizations. The Philippine teachers have benefited from opportunities to teach groups of emerging adults, rather than the individual adults who form their usual client base. As such, they have learned how to teach presentation skills to small groups and cope with a very different classroom dynamic involving a much more active approach to class management. Additionally, several teachers have come from the Philippines to observe face-to-face classes in Japan. This non-virtual interaction has dramatically improved the relationships between everyone involved in the organization of the exchange.

The collaboration with the university in Belgium has taken more time to establish. There are several issues that have contributed to this. First, the number of stakeholders is much larger, which provides great flexibility, but also complicates the decision-making process. Next, it is difficult to coordinate everyone's schedules, taking into account different working hours, academic cultures, time constraints, and time zones.

The Kenyan exchange exemplified one of the most basic problems of VEs: finding suitable partners. In this case, we relied on existing personal relationships to make a connection with a teacher who wanted to improve the intercultural communication skills of the students at their university.

In all of the VE projects, the teachers at all the institutions spent a long time negotiating with exchange partners as to the content, length, and timing of both synchronous and asynchronous activities, all designed toward the achievement

of the disparate goals of the students and their institutions. Largely, all of the participants were open-minded and flexible, and keen to learn as much as they could during the process. The time needed for planning, consultation, and negotiation was thereby vital in order for the exchanges to move ahead smoothly.

3.9. Issues surrounding technology

While some teachers are not confident in their technological skills and hesitate to foray into uncharted waters using them in their teaching, the recent advances in intuitive technology mean that VE is often now possible without specific technological support. Allowing both teachers and learners to use technology they feel comfortable with is important. Because both instructors and learners use smartphones as part of regular daily life, and the tools for VE use a similar operating system, there are few difficulties in set up or operation. This is the case at the university where these three projects are based, and our collaborators in the Philippines, Belgium, and Kenya are similarly situated.

The exception to this, for all contexts, is problems maintaining a fast, stable wireless connection. VE can place a heavy burden on the sometimes fragile network, and time-lags, choppiness, and sudden cut-offs are not uncommon. Flexibility in planning is important: Activities should be prepared in advance that can be accomplished asynchronously should the connection drop out, and teachers on both sides of the exchange should be familiar with one another's roles. On one occasion during a session with the Philippines, the connection was completely lost and a teacher on the ground in Japan was asked to come into the classroom and teach face-to-face as a substitute. Students should also be forewarned that changes to the planned schedule may be necessary to prevent disappointment.

3.10. Issues concerning assessment

As VE has developed and moved toward the incorporation of intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence, methods of assessment have needed to be re-evaluated, and new methods found to reflect these new learning goals, particularly as measuring intercultural competence has proved to be

difficult. One method of measuring VE interaction that has been trialed measures student participation levels, and counts either how many times participants send emails or post messages, or how much time they have spent using the software (O'Dowd, 2013). Unfortunately, however, simply leaving the software open on their desktop is often counted as active study time, leading to high scores for little or no activity. High levels of participation, whether measured by time online or number of interchanges, have not been found to correlate with learning of the target material (O'Dowd, 2013). As such, it was decided rather than rubrics, portfolios, and reflections would be used to assess student progress across the three VE projects. Rubrics were chosen as they are easily understood and managed by both students and teachers. Table 1 (supplementary materials, Appendix A) contains which shows an example of part of a rubric used in the Filipino exchange which documents visible examples of students' anxiety as perceived by the Filipino teachers and assesses their presentation skills. Table 2 (supplementary materials, Appendix B) is an adaptation of the rubric from the international cross-cultural experiential learning evaluation toolkit from SUNY (2015) for use in classes focusing on intercultural communication. Portfolios are another popular method, which although still do not necessarily address the potentially unwieldy issue of intercultural competence directly, provide a method of assessment that is more holistic. The final method we use is reflective journaling as it provides a space in which it is easier to address issues of intercultural competence as well as other factors concerning the exchanges.

In the Philippine exchange, all assessment of the activities done synchronously is carried by the Filipino teachers using a rubric. The use of a rubric forces these instructors to focus specifically on the presentation skills that are the target of the course. Nonverbal aspects of communication such as eye contact, posture and facial expressions, verbal skills such as pacing and volume, and content and organization are all able to be evaluated in this way. Specific English linguistic ability is not assessed because students are not streamed by ability into class groups, and, while all students are expected to make linguistic progress, this progress is not assessed for their course grade. The students are also graded by their teachers in Japan on the practice and preparation activities that they undertake in class. Finally, students are asked at several points during the

semester to write reflections on their learning experiences, and these are also used to assess the achievement of learning goals.

In the Kenyan exchange, student achievement on the Japanese side of the exchange is measured with a portfolio approach. Students keep the various artifacts they create during the various activities, and choose how to present and organize them. An introspective journal forms a large part of this portfolio, where they reflect on their experiences and what they have learned from the exchange.

A difficult challenge that many teachers involved in VEs face is in deciding how courses created jointly can be officially accredited. Students on both sides of exchanges require assessment and course credits for the work they do. In Japan, there has been a slow acceptance of credits for online education and this will need to be addressed in the future.

3.11. Context-specific issues

Each VE is unique to its context and the scale of the exchange is important. The Kenyan exchange is small and due to this it is easy to be flexible with both content, types of interaction, and time. The organization of the Filipino exchange takes place between individual teachers in Japan and a privately run Japanese company and thus is relatively straightforward and manageable. The exchange with the university in Belgium is larger than either of the other exchanges and also has more institutional constraints on both sides. The structure of university systems can present barriers to collaboration due to traditional ways of working and curriculum constraints. Trying to match classes from the respective institutions within the present curriculum has proved to be difficult and at present we are trying to put compatible courses in place for the future.

4. Conclusion

VEs are versatile, flexible, and inclusive, and provide incredible learning experiences for both students and teachers. They allow students who might

otherwise never interact with people from other backgrounds to engage in what may prove to be eye-opening and life-changing opportunities and as such are a wonderful addition to most educational programs. However, building VEs is an ongoing process and further research is needed on how to create more sustainable models. Additionally, more training and support is necessary for teachers both at an individual and institutional level, and rather than individuals repeating the same processes in isolation, we need to focus on developing generic models that can be easily used in various contexts.

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6. Supplementary materials

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