

Virtual Exchange as a Mechanism for Digital Education

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Abstract *Virtual exchange (VE), a pedagogical approach towards intercultural dialogue among young people supported by technology, has been prominent over the past two to three decades. In this chapter, I offer a general introduction to the different types of Virtual Exchange and focus on a particular approach provided by the Sharing Perspectives Foundation (SPF). The logic and theoretical foundation on which the SPF programmes and courses are built are presented and the efficacy of using Virtual Exchange as a tool to prepare the ground for the seeds of social inclusion and civic engagement are debated, while various virtual exchange programmes offered by the SPF and its partners are also discussed. This chapter combines scientific research with years of practice to offer a holistic view of the application of Virtual Exchange in peace education. I dwell on my own ten years of experience in the field of VE, wearing the various hats of participant, facilitator, coach and mentor, trainer, programme officer and partnership coordinator at the Sharing Perspectives Foundation (SPF), as well as a lecturer at Hebron University in Palestine.*

Keywords *Virtual Exchange; Facilitative Learning; Online Education; Social Reconciliation; Dialogue*

1. Introduction

The words digital, virtual, and hybrid are not new terminologies; however, they have become very well-known with a significant shift to online and/or hybrid learning models, pre- and post-pandemic. For example, for the past two decades, Virtual Exchange (VE) has been a prominent tool that has brought people from geographically distant places to discuss, debate, and exchange

perspectives, while also sharing expertise, experience, and knowledge, as well as beliefs, ideas, and customs. This may lead to mutual understanding, appreciation, and the acquisition of knowledge regarding various cultures.

A year into the pandemic, screen fatigue was a common syndrome of online education, and educators and institutions desperately needed new strategies to engage students while offering intercultural communication opportunities. The influx of high demand for VE and tailored courses and workshops on online teaching flushed the web; luckily, organizations who had already been developing the field of VE, such as SPF, Soliya, UniCollaboration and others, were able to assist lecturers and institutions with pedagogically tested approaches. It is worth mentioning here that these three organizations (SPF, Soliya, and UniCollaboration) retain different programming when offering their Virtual Exchanges, however, they share the same pedagogical approaches and strategies and collaborate in trainings and workshops.

Although there has been quite a substantial momentum in building and offering Virtual Exchanges, scientific research has not given it its due right; most of the publications in this arena are case studies of specific exchanges, conference proceedings, or project reports. Therefore, in this chapter I combine my experiences with scientific approaches to help the reader visualize VE as a concept, an approach, and a practice.

2. What is Virtual Exchange?

Like any terminology, there are debates and controversies on what exactly VE is, and which models are included and which are not. Thus to convey a better understanding of the concept in use, I build on the definition of the project EVOLVE (n.d.)¹:

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a practice, supported by research, that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programs or activities in which constructive communication and interaction take place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated

¹ The Erasmus + EVOLVE (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange) project, launched in January 2018 and led by the University of Groningen, aims to mainstream virtual exchange as an innovative form of collaborative international learning across disciplines in higher education institutions in Europe and beyond.

and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators. Virtual Exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology.

[...] VE is:

- *Sustained*: Unfolding over time with regular, intensive interaction.
- *Technology-enabled*: Using new media, digital, and/or mobile technologies.
- Preferably based on *regular synchronous or near-synchronous* meetings using high social presence media.
- *People-to-people*: Involving inclusive, intercultural collaboration and dialogue that bridges differences and distances and inspires action with a long-term positive impact on relationships.
- *Learner-led*: Following the philosophy of dialogue where participants are the main recipients and the main drivers of knowledge; learning through dialogue means that participants will seek mutual understanding and co-create knowledge based on their own experiences.
- *Facilitated*: with the support of trained facilitators and/or educators.
- *Educational*: Integrated into formal and/or non-formal educational programmes and activities to develop measurable increases in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that foster pro-social behaviours.
- *Structured to foster mutual understanding*: Covering topics related to identity, empathy, perspective-taking, critical reflection, intercultural understanding, and helping participants to engage in constructive conversations in the face of ontological and epistemological differences; a key tenet of VE is that intercultural understanding and awareness are not automatic outcomes of contact between different groups/cultures.

In many aspects, Interactive Open Online Courses (iOOCs), as one form of VE, differentiates itself from other forms of online education like MOOCs, virtual mobility, and blended mobility to name a few. According to Mühlbauer and van der Velden (2022, p. 8), those four are comparable in terms of sustained interaction and are defined as follows:

I OOCs “combine content presented in a similar format to MOOCs, with an interactive component which includes weekly synchronous discussion sessions in small groups with the support of a dialogue facilitator, to encourage people-to-people intercultural communication.” (Mühlbauer & van der Velden, 2022, p. 8) While Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are “courses usually

delivered online through a platform such as EdX, Coursera or Futurelearn [...] the focus of these is primarily on content delivery – they are mostly based on recorded video lectures and learning materials. Although many now do have a forum component and encourage students to interact, the interaction is not sustained and is optional.” (Mühlbauer & van der Velden, 2022, p. 8)

However, Virtual Mobility allows “students from one educational institution to follow courses organized at a different institution (usually based in a different country) without having to leave home.” (Mühlbauer & van der Velden, 2022, p. 8) The primary aim of Virtual Mobility is to impart subject knowledge, potentially in a field or on a specific topic not covered at the student’s home university. This is achieved by leveraging complementary expertise but without necessitating student interaction with peers from the host institution.

Lastly, Blended Mobility is “the combination of physical mobility with a virtual component, aimed at facilitating collaborative online learning and teamwork.” (Mühlbauer & van der Velden, 2022, p. 8). The virtual element can serve multiple purposes: It can prepare students for physical mobility, or it can be utilized post-physical mobility to further enrich cultural learning. Alternatively, it can be integrated during physical mobility itself to directly enhance certain aspects of the experience (Mühlbauer & van der Velden, 2022, p. 8).

3. Why Choose Virtual Exchange?

As already mentioned, the present author has worn and exchanged various hats of participant, facilitator, coach and mentor, trainer, program officer, partnership coordinator, and lecturer within the world of Virtual Exchange. I started my journey in 2013 as a participant in the first program offered by the Sharing Perspectives Foundation – “Perspectives on the Euro(pean) Crisis” – while undertaking my MA degree at Osnabrück University, in Germany. The following year I underwent intensive advanced online facilitation training and began as an online facilitator, becoming then an experienced facilitator, mentor and coach by 2017. From 2018, I led the development of the first Arabic Virtual Exchange “Technology and Society”, and managed programmes and partnerships while facilitating groups in various Virtual Exchanges. Those manifold experiences provided me with transversal, pedagogical, and conflict transformation skills. Likewise, exploring with partners the possibilities of

the integration, accreditation, and institutionalization of Virtual Exchange heightened many benefits for the lecturers, their students and institutions, and Hebron University (Palestine), the institution at which I teach.²

As a lecturer, I used Virtual Exchange as a complementary component to enrich my students' experiences on topics they would not otherwise have tackled and offered them opportunities to meet with young people from other cultures and geographically distant places. Knowing that Palestinians suffer severely from movement restrictions, even the chance to meet other Palestinian students from the West Bank and Gaza was a new experience for them.³ I also used my personal experiences with my students to engage many universities and coordinators to join us and offer virtual exchange courses to their students. Mine is not the only success story for the integration of VE into the academic curriculum. Other success stories of implementation partners can be found in the EVE reports⁴ and the *Journal of Virtual Exchange*⁵.

The question that comes to mind is: Why chose virtual exchange, not other forms of blended learning? As Helm and van der Velden (2019, p. 139) write:

Virtual Exchange is a potentially more inclusive medium for connecting a greater number and diversity of youth to a space for dialogue and relationship-building with their global peers. Through facilitated, meaningful, and multilateral interaction, young people have the opportunity to build greater understanding of the relationship between different societies, expand their worldview and build critical 21st century skills and attitudes such as communication skills, self and global-awareness, critical and analytical thinking, curiosity, and media and digital literacy, which are also important for employability.

VE strives for intercultural awareness and sensitivity through opportunities to explore assumptions, beliefs, values, feelings, attitudes, behaviours, and self-

2 For more information see the Toolkit for Integrating Virtual Exchange in Higher Education, see: <https://frames-project.eu/outputs/toolkit/>

3 In my courses at Hebron University, my students mainly took part in the Technology and Society and Cultural Encounters Virtual Exchanges, where they met with participants from other universities in Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria, and EU countries, mainly Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, as well as Venezuela in Latin America.

4 https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/eyp_eve/files/ec-01-21-404-en-n_final.pdf

5 <https://journal.unicollaboration.org>

reflection in a safe space and constructively engage with differences. Likewise, it assures the facilitation of a group process built on inter-group, dialogue, and conflict resolution theories while empowering the development of 21st-century communication skills that emphasize active listening, empathy, and understanding. Similarly, VE tackles digital literacy by introducing ways technology could be used to build a more sustainable and inclusive world. Finally, VE works on deepening and widening perspectives on life situations, exemplified by the testimonials of numerous alumni from various programmes.⁶ One example is from a participant who joined the Cultural Encounters course offered by the Sharing Perspectives Foundation in 2018. She reflects:

[W]e learned to put oneself in somebody's position which is a skill that will be helpful far beyond this [virtual exchange] course. Even in the case of disagreement, we acquired a degree of empathy because of which we were able to try to understand the reasons for someone's divergent opinion instead of judging this person because of his or her view. This is a very essential ability in order to talk with each other as equals and being open-minded in regard of other understandings and beliefs.⁷

4. Which Model of Virtual Exchange?

There are various emerging models within the intricate realm of Virtual Exchange ranging from, but not limited to, Interactive Open Online Courses (iOOCs), Online Facilitated Dialogue (OFD), Transnational Exchange Projects (TEPs), and Advocacy Training (AT).⁸ These four models remained the principal VE activities for the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project (EVE)⁹ which ran from 2018 to 2020. Each component was led by a different partner in the consortium headed by Search for Common Ground (Belgium)¹⁰. iOOCs were

6 <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/impact/>

7 <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/impact/>

8 For more information on those different formats, see Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2020 https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/eyp_eve/files/ec-01-21-404-en-n_final.pdf

9 Erasmus + Virtual Exchange (EVE) 2018–2020 is a pilot project part of the Erasmus+ programme funded by the European Commission. For further information on the programme and the project, see: <https://youth.europa.eu/erasmusvirtual/>

10 <https://www.sfcg.org>

led by the Sharing Perspectives Foundation (Netherlands), OFDs by Soliya (USA and Tunisia), TEPs by UniCollaboration (Italy), and AT by the Anne Lindh Foundation (Germany).

The fundamental principle of all models lies with the use of technology to facilitate connections among young people across geographical and cultural boundaries; however, there also exist notable differences between these models. Broadly speaking, two typologies can be discerned within EVE (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange): ‘ready-made’ exchanges, which are developed and implemented by project consortium members, and ‘grassroots’ exchanges, organized by educators or youth workers who have undergone specialized training programmes. Additionally, further differentiations may be made based on content, participant activities, duration (measured in weeks), and the intensity of engagement in various activities. These distinctions provide invaluable insights into the level of participant involvement in Virtual Exchange endeavours.

Table (1) compares between the four types of Virtual Exchange in terms of the above-mentioned criteria:

Table 1: Models of Virtual Exchange Activities Based on the Table of Helm and van der Velden (2021)

	Online Facilitated Dialogue (OFD)	Interactive Open Online Courses (iOOCs)	Transnational Exchange Project (TEP)	Advocacy Training/ Debate (AT)
Lead institution or partnership type programme	Soliya	Sharing Perspectives Foundation	HEI or youth organization partnerships with support from UNICollaboration	Debate leaders with support from Anne Lindh Foundation
Programme Administration Type	4 VE programmes run the same way across multiple sites	3 to 5VE programmes run the same way across multiple sites	Unique co-designed VEs	Single VE programme run in different ways by local team leaders

	Online Facilitated Dialogue (OFD)	Interactive Open Online Courses (iOOCs)	Transnational Exchange Project (TEP)	Advocacy Training/ Debate (AT)
Learning Content or Topics	Empathy, global competence	Empathy, global competence, iOOC specific content	Intercultural communication, collaboration, subject-specific content	Debating skills, topics related to debating
VE Activity type	Dialogue (sometimes also project)	Dialogue, videolectures, interactive assignments	Asynchronous tasks, project-based activities, dialogue	Debate, post-debate dialogue session
Duration	2 hrs meeting a week for 2, 4, 5 or 8 weeks	2 hrs meeting a week for 5, 6, 9, or 10 weeks	2–4 hours live meeting dialogue and 10–30 hrs asynchronous work over 4 to 8 weeks	3 hrs debate and 2 hrs dialogue trainings over 1 or 2 weeks
Quality control	Mini-web surveys, post-exchange evaluation, coach/ observation	Mini-web surveys, post-exchange evaluation, coach/ observation	Mini-web surveys, post-exchange evaluation, mentors	Mini-web surveys, post-exchange evaluation, adjudicators

Each model has its specificities, and each model may have multiple formats. In this chapter, I only focus on iOOCs offered by the Sharing Perspectives

Foundation (SPF)¹¹ as the format I am most acquainted with and also the form of VE implemented in the project in Palestine, which I focus on.

SPF developed its model of educational exchange on facilitative learning¹² to encourage deep exploration of topics related to identity, empathy, perspective-taking, critical reflection, and intercultural understanding. It also aims at equipping participants with 21st century skills relating to employability and transversal skills, tolerance of ambiguity, curiosity, confidence, serenity, decisiveness, and vigour (Helm & van der Velden 2019, p. 24).¹³ The iOOCs designed by the SPF are based on three core elements: multimedial material, facilitated dialogue, and interactive assignments (Millner, 2020, p. 157).

Multimedia Materials

On a weekly basis, participants are stimulated by bite-size (i.e. shorter) materials prepared by experts and further practitioners on the exchange topics. Those include short articles, infographics, videos, and podcasts on the week's theme. Participants read, watch, and/or listen to the weekly materials, reflect

11 Sharing Perspectives Foundation is a nonprofit organization based in the Netherlands. It offers contemporary online learning experiences, enabling people to interact constructively across differences and divides. Since its foundation in 2012, the Sharing Perspectives has engaged more than 10,000 young people in virtual exchange courses, worked with over 80 institutions, trained and coached 250+ facilitators, facilitated 1000s of online dialogue sessions, and implemented over 10 different virtual exchanges in English as well as Arabic. See: <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/about/>.

12 See the following sub-section.

13 SPF bases its approach to developing transversal skills based on the following definitions: "**Tolerance of Ambiguity** (Acceptance of other people's culture and attitudes and adaptability): A range, from rejection to attraction, of reactions to stimuli perceived as unfamiliar, complex, dynamically uncertain or subject to multiple conflicting interpretations (McLain, 1993); **Curiosity** (Openness to new experiences): The orientation toward seeking novel and challenging objects, events and ideas with the aim of integrating these experiences and information; **Confidence** (Trust in own competence) A favourable or unfavourable attitude toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 15); **Serenity** (Awareness of own strengths and weaknesses): Beliefs in one's capabilities to mobilise the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands (Wood & Bandura, 1989); **Decisiveness** (Ability to make decisions Decisiveness) Ability to reach decisions as quickly as possible (Kosic, 2004)." (van der Velden et al., 2016, pp.219-220)

individually, and then meet for group reflection in the facilitated dialogue sessions.

Facilitated Dialogue

On a weekly basis, participants meet at the same time and place in the same group with the same facilitator for two hours of dialogue. Along with trust/relationship-building, work on identity, critical thinking, process-reflection, conflict resolution, forward-thinking, activation, and group work activities, participants discuss and share their knowledge, experience, thoughts, and culture with the help of experienced dialogue facilitators. During the facilitated dialogue sessions, participants also plan for activities and initiatives to engage their peers and communities. Similarly, they are motivated to take actions during the course, where an ideal example taken from the “Climate Movements” course would be the planting of a tree in the name of the group. In order to ensure best facilitation, the EVE consortium introduces the figure of the mentor, who is an expert facilitator who supports ‘newbies’, and the coach who observes the session and gives feedback to the facilitator(s). In debate contests the figure of the adjudicator (or judge) has been introduced, i.e. the person determining the outcome and ranking of debaters or debater-teams.

Interactive Assignments

Participants have interactive assignments throughout the process, including content and process reflections, initiative developments, and community engagement.

Reflection is an integral part of the learning process. Participants have two short self-reflection written assignments every week: one on the content before the session (preparation assignment), and one on the discussion after the session (reflection journal). Likewise, participants go through meta-discussions on the process, as well as content reflection through dialogue but also activities stimulating in-depth analysis, critical thinking, and problem solving.¹⁴

Another main assignment is the community engagement assignment. It has multiple formats differing from one course to the other. For example, the flagship courses “Cultural Encounters” and “Climate Movements” contain a video dialogue assignment, where each group agrees on a question to ask their

14 Such activities can be found here: <https://www.sessionlab.com/library>

peers, teachers, and family members who are not taking part in the course. The peers they choose for the video dialogue will then respond to each other in an asynchronous dialogue. The videos are posted on a private platform for the course, and each group has a separate group account where they post their peers' contributions. The participants show the videos and responses of the other respondents and ask their peers to respond to one or more discussions. This constitutes the discussion threads for the asynchronous dialogue. Another example would be the final assignments for the courses "Countering Hate Speech" and "Youth, Peace and Security", where participants were asked to create their initiatives for the cause they are working on. They had the option to work either independently or collaboratively, with mutual support through suggestions and sharing of information being an integral part of the process.

5. Facilitative Learning

Since a distinctive feature of VE is the combination of synchronous/asynchronous elements, a better understanding of the synergetic interplay is needed. The asynchronous element constitutes the preparation and reflection journal, the interactive assignments, the email communications between the facilitator and the participants, and the course team and the participants. The synchronous element is mainly the facilitated dialogue sessions – arguably, where most of the learning happens.

Each step of the VE is important, and the facilitative learning approach plays a key role in the learning process. Facilitative learning refers to an instructional approach that emphasizes the role of a facilitator in promoting effective learning experiences. In this approach, participants are at the centre of the learning process and the leaders of it (Hardika et al., 2018, p. 187). Their experiences, knowledge, and thoughts are main resources for the learning process, where peer-learning especially in an international setting is an added value to the participants. In this setting, participants are encouraged to share the full leadership of their group, initiating the discussion, asking each other questions, reflecting respectfully on others' thoughts and experiences, actively listening and showing empathy.

Reaching this genuine stage of exchange requires fostering safe spaces for participants to open up and speak freely; hence an experienced facilitator/s are needed here (Conti et al., 2022, p. 201).

6. The Role of the Facilitator

In this approach, the facilitator serves as a guide or mentor rather than a traditional teacher who solely imparts knowledge. The facilitator's role is to create a safe environment that supports and encourages the participants' active engagement and knowledge construction, ensuring understanding and ability to contribute to discussions (Baraldi, Joslyn & Farini, 2022a, pp. 6–9). In addition, they provide guidance and opportunities for participants to explore and discover information, develop critical thinking skills, and apply their knowledge in real-world contexts (Helm, 2018, p. 112). Facilitation is composed by an array of actions, such as questions, invitations to talk, minimal responses, reformulations of the participants' contributions (Farini & Scollan, 2022), summaries, and also emotional support which starts with the initial greetings and ends with leave-taking (Helm, 2018, p. 112).

As an experienced facilitator, mentor and coach, I have worked with and trained many different facilitation styles. All styles incorporate empathy as an underlying element and share the same core principles of neutrality – in terms of refraining from sharing their opinions – and impartiality – i.e. fairness towards all participants, giving them the same opportunities to share their opinions and to make sure their statements are understood. Facilitators of the EVE consortium organizations are highly trained to refrain from sharing their opinions and ensure equal participation of all group members. In order to do that, they practice active listening and further facilitation techniques to react properly to non-verbal communication of the participants and make sure that all statements are correctly understood by providing summaries in both written chat messages and spoken explanations, asking follow-up questions or rephrasing the ideas shared. Facilitators are also prepared for the challenging situations of conflict, politically sensitive situations, and disengaged groups. Through tailored activities for critical thinking, conflict resolution, and team-building, like but not limited to the Ice-Berg, The Rose-Bud-Thorn, Walk a Mile in My Shoes, and many others¹⁵, meta-discussions, and individual check-ups, facilitators help transform conflicts into positive experiences, challenging biases and stereotypes and creating a common ground for understanding the issues addressed. A significant challenge for facilitators is to read group dynamics and power imbalances and offer activities and reflections, posing thought-provoking questions to keep the discussion flowing and ensuring

15 For more information on activities, see: <https://www.sessionlab.com/library>

understanding, active engagement, and genuine learning. Facilitators help participants lead their discussions and retain the task of deepening understanding and developing trust, honesty, and empathy as the course progresses (Millner, 2020, p. 158–9).

Facilitators of SPF are equipped with a group process framework that guides the group through different phases, ensuring participants become progressively more comfortable in articulating their perspectives (Millner, 2020, p. 158–9). SPF has designed its group process to encompass different stages, recognizing that not every group follows a linear development. Facilitators utilize this framework as a guiding tool to facilitate genuine exchanges from the first encounter to winding down, understanding that groups may need to adapt and sometimes skip stages as they naturally progress. In my personal experience as well as in the literature (see e.g. Conti 2021; and Baraldi et al. 2022b), the more the group members trust the group, feel heard and confident of opening up; sharing personal stories and discussing openly challenging topics, the more they advance towards genuine discussion. Similarly, in my personal experience, the more the group addresses differences and self-manages disruptive conflicts and discussions tending towards creative solutions, the more the group moves towards effective dialogue and community engagement.

Facilitators are an integral component of the process, therefore, and investment in training and coaching for them has become a priority for organizations working in the arena of VE, such as SPF, Soliya, UNICollaboration and others.

7. Virtual Exchange in Education

Over the years VE has been integrated by lecturers and universities in many formats to offer students a wide range of opportunities to network and learn through intercultural exchange, also as part of their internationalization strategies. The demand for VEs increased during the pandemic and more lecturers and institutions began exploring the various types of VE to integrate to their strategies and budgets.¹⁶ The popularity of virtual networking fairs and

16 A list of some of the partnering universities can be found here: <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/partnerships/>

info-sessions on VE like the ones offered by UNIMED¹⁷ and COIL¹⁸ indicated both a need and an interest in virtual exchanges.

Since the focus of this chapter is on iOOCs, I will delve into the integration of iOOCs into educational programmes and summarize the experience undertaken with VE in the SPF Programm¹⁹ and present some observed benefits of incorporating iOOCs into the curriculum.

Building on my experience in partnership management, iOOCs were offered either as a standalone course (rarely due to accreditation bureaucracies), and more frequently as a replacement of a language course (mostly English), as an extra-curricular activity, and/or as part of an ongoing course which does not necessarily link directly to the theme of the VE, however it relates to it in terms of learning objectives (e.g intercultural communication, building 21st-century skills). The choice of the delivery method considered the needs of the partners and of their students.

In the following I will draw on the experience acquired at the University of Bordeaux and at Hebron University.

In her 2020 chapter, “Erasmus Virtual Exchange: An Authentic Learning Experience”, Alexandra Reynolds explores the transformative impact of the participation to the flagship course “Cultural Encounters” delivered by SPF of the University students in Bordeaux. Utilizing their reflection journals, she assessed the authenticity of their learning based on four key factors: emerging community membership, altered world views, English language learning, and pedagogical conditions. Reynolds observed a progression from initial shyness and hesitation to confident group participation in the journals. Likewise, participants’ journal entries indicated a growing self-awareness and a shift in their worldviews (Reynolds, 2020, p.91).

In relation to the English language learning, Reynolds reflected on overall satisfaction concerning improved English language skills. She used a comparative approach between English classes offered at the university and the VE based on the number of participants, place of residence/origin, and format, where participants in the VE emphasized the benefits of being in a smaller group compared to general classes, speaking with non-French speakers as a

17 <https://www.uni-med.net>

18 <https://coil.suny.edu>

19 I refer to a SPF-project involving the University of Bordeaux University in France, the University of Limerick in Ireland, the University of Bethlehem as well as the Hebron University in Palestine and many other universities in the MENA and EU.

motivation for speaking English only, as well as interdisciplinarity (Reynolds 2020, p.92-3). Finally, she measured authentic learning in VE in relation to the pedagogical conditions of “engaging in meaningful and transformative interaction using English as a lingua franca; topic-focused study on a theme which is relevant to students as global citizens; learner autonomy and responsibility; an emerging sense of belonging to an online E+VE [sic] community; and interacting in a third (neutral) place.” (Reynolds, 2020, p.95) She concluded by indicating the authentic nature of learning using VE as a “positive, existential, and positioned learner experience (Reynolds, 2020, p.96)”. As a result Bordeaux University continues to partner with SPF and offer VE courses for its students.

Wearing the hat of lecturer, I can relate my personal experience with students at Hebron University. I engaged my students in the “Technology and Society”²⁰ course delivered by SPF in which SPF involved mainly students of the MENA region: Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. The course was in Arabic. The VE was counted as their final assignment for their course. During the VE, I regularly offered participants the possibility to share their reflections regarding their VE-experience with me and their peers. Positive feedback in the reflections related to the atmosphere, the opportunity to meet other Arab youth whom they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to meet, and the interactive aspect of the experience. Alongside this bright side of VE and its successful incorporation into the regular structures of the curricula, difficulties regarding access to the Internet remained a main frustration and constraint to full engagement in some cases.

Thereupon, and since VE in education has been gaining in popularity globally, efforts to support the integration of VE in existing formats and the accreditation of standalone courses were put in place by various other organizations. Examples include, but are not limited to, the project FRAMES²¹, COIL, UNICollaboration²², and the Stevens Initiative²³ projects.

20 <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/programme/technology-and-society/>

21 <https://frames-project.eu>

22 <https://www.unicollaboration.org>

23 <https://www.stevensinitiative.org>

8. Potential New Areas for the Use of Virtual Exchange

So far, most of the relevant research in facilitative learning and Virtual Exchange has tackled the essence of the connection between exchange and learning. Throughout my work in Virtual Exchange and education, I have come to the idea of exploring the efficacy of using VE for social reconciliation in reference to Palestinian civil society, in a case study using cycles of virtual exchanges as described below. This project is described here, as it will be implemented in cooperation with SPF.

9. Virtual Exchange in Peace Education – Reconciliation

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Education (UNESCO, 1945) has placed in its constitution the importance of peace education, by indicating that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” Peace education is a “process of acquiring the values and knowledge and developing the attitudes, skills and behaviour to live in harmony with oneself, with others, and with the natural environment. It aims to reduce violence, support the transformation of conflicts, and advance the peace capabilities of individuals, groups, societies and institutions” (Jäger in Berghof Foundation, 2019, p. 49).

Peace education can be approached through dialogue, where dialogue is initiated to acquire a better judgement of the argument and to overcome differences on the political and societal levels and to transform conflicts (Breitmaier and Schram in Berghof Foundation, 2019, p. 47). Virtual exchange is built on the modalities of dialogue. In dialogue, one listens to the different side(s) to understand and find meaning. My experience confirms that dialogue reveals assumptions for re-evaluation and acknowledgment of biases, causes introspection on one's position and its origin, and may promote an open-minded attitude. Furthermore, successful dialogue is collaborative and leads towards a sense of community understanding, brings out areas of ambivalence, looks for shared meanings, re-examines and destabilizes long-held ideas, articulates areas of conflict and differences, builds and empowers relationships, and honours silence.

Virtual Exchange as an ICT tool aims at fostering empathy, acknowledging differences, accepting the ‘other,’ challenging stereotypes, and building relationships based on mutual respect (Millner, 2020, p. 157), all of which adhere to

the reconciliation method for social change introduced by Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004), who discuss a list of principles entailing the transformation of conflict into new goals; the re-definition of the 'other', usually perceived as an adversary, in order to build peaceful relationships among people; the challenging of one's own biases and the stimulation of awareness of one's own position in power dynamics; and the transformation of the relationship between the conflicting groups towards acceptance and mutual respect (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004, pp. 20–38).

Therefore, utilizing Virtual Exchange in conflictual socio-political settings is believed to contribute to fruitful dialogues and finding common ground on the issues under discussion.

Social Reconciliation

Reconciliation is about finding a way of dealing with the issues that divide in a creative and viable manner. It is the beginning of learning to live together, not the culmination of a process that occurs after all alienating obstacles are removed. It is about serious talk, in-depth listening and a willingness to enact a new way of living together in which we can productively work with the most stubborn problems, practices and behaviours of the past (du Toit, 2003, p. 26).

"Toenadering," or coming together, is a core element of reconciliation and social transformation according to Fanie du Toit (2003). Toenadering entails bilateral or multilateral discussions, though it goes beyond involving diverse stakeholders from geographically and ideologically separated groups, with the main focus on the power of civil society to drive change. Reaching this stage entails, as one of the steps of social reconciliation, intra-community dialogue with the participation of various stakeholders. Intra-community dialogues retain three principal goals: 1) "preventing the complexity of ever-growing numbers of factions and splinter groups within communities"; 2) "helping to prepare communities for a process where their social identities, shaped by years of conflict, isolation and oppression, may be challenged"; and 3) "empowering marginalized communities to find a stronger communal voice" (du Toit, 2003, pp. 153–154). In addition, this process of intra-community dialogue helps create safe spaces for expressing and dealing with the residual anger, mistrust, and hurt, debating courses of action, and the inclusion of all players and stakeholders (du Toit 2003, pp. 153–154).

Virtual Exchange for Reconciliation – Palestine

The active role of Palestinian civil society in politics has been receding since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. The creation of a new body of authority has shifted away many of the previous political roles played by the societal elites and tribal heads of Palestine, roles held during the Ottoman period, during the British Mandate and the Israeli occupation, roles now held by the new authority (Pappé 2010, pp. 11–21). This society has been further divided geographically, socially, and politically by the West Bank and Gaza Strip division and the different political movements acting as parties. These include the two dominant parties/movements (Fatah and Hamas), many fringe parties and groups, Arab Israelis – or as they are often called “Arab 48” (Arab citizens of the state of Israel) – and Palestinians in the diaspora.

This society has been through many shocks that have further entrenched the gaps and have created fanatic supporters of the two dominant parties Fatah and Hamas. The feeble relations among the society were ruptured in the 2006 elections, continued to show areas of disagreement, were evident in the worsened circumstances preceding the proposed elections in May 2021, and fully damaged with the postponement of the elections until further notice. Regardless of the local, national and international attempts at reconciliation over the past 17 years, starting with the 2006 Document of the Prisoners agreement to the reconciliation attempts in Cairo to prepare for 2021 elections, reconciliation has not taken place on the ground. On the contrary, reconciliation among the parties’ leaders undermined the effects and power of civil society to ignite the spark of the aspired change, of a perpetual internal calmness and serenity.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the Palestinian population for 2020 in Palestine is circa 5 million: 3 million in the West Bank and 2 million in Gaza (PCBS 2021). In addition, in 2019, the registered Palestinian refugees totalled circa 5.6 million (PCBS 2020). Those numbers exclude most of the unregistered refugees, refugees who left the country after the 1967 war, and about 1.6 million of the so-called Arab 48 (PCBS 2020).²⁴ The

24 For a better understanding of this division of registered and unregistered refugees I refer to the definition of UNRWA of Palestinian refugees as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine from 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict;” who are registered by UNHCR and UNRWA mandates; or who are also residing in one of the 58 recognized refugee camps by UNRWA in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Ten new recognized camps were added after the

geographical distance, the impediment to movement, and the lack of dialogue among those sections of Palestinian society urge the need to find alternative approaches and tools for starting dialogue and reconciliation among the wider society using ICT. VE can certainly be one of these.

In collaboration with higher education institutions, such as but not limited to, Hebron University, Bethlehem University, the Islamic University of Gaza, Al Azhar University, Al Najah University, and Birzeit University, civil society organizations and the Sharing Perspectives Foundation, I am engaging at present in testing VE towards social reconciliation. In this project, Palestinian youth (18–30 years old) across the spectrum are invited to explore bottom-up social reconciliation.²⁵ The participants come together in cycles taking place over 9–10 weeks, where they meet weekly in facilitated sessions to discuss and brainstorm challenging topics (e.g. identity, inclusion/exclusion, citizenship, political and social participation, democracy) which they would not otherwise discuss in such diverse groups. Thus, they learn to acknowledge differences while also realizing their many similarities, resolve and transform conflicts, challenge their biases and stereotypes about the ‘other’²⁶, develop empathy, and collaborate in conceiving and implementing together social initiatives.

The outcomes of each cycle inform subsequent cycles. Weekly reflections on materials and discussions in pre- and post-reflections are promptly analyzed to extract lessons for designing or updating the next cycle/s. The final projects initiated by participants aim at further supporting subsequent project steps and contribute to long-term reconciliation efforts.

1967 war for the new wave of Palestinian refugees (<https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>).

These refugees do not include internally displaced Palestinians residing in cities, villages, and around the refugee camps (<https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>).

Likewise, the term Arab 48 (Arab citizens of the state of Israel) refers to Palestinians who stayed inside the borders of the newly created state of Israel. They were internally displaced but remained inside the new borders. (Pappé 2011, p. 37)

25 Social reconciliation is a special type of reconciliation which focus on the relationship among individuals in a community. By using the term bottom-up social reconciliation, I refer to the Toenadering with a twist, where community leaders’ role will be minimal at the pilot stage and the focus will be mainly on individuals.

26 The other in this context can entail different political affiliations, residences, economic situations, and/or might belong to another religion; although religion plays a minor role in the Palestinian Civil Society division, it is still relevant for a future social contract.

As this project retains roots in a Community-Based Participatory Approach (CBPA)²⁷, it entails actively engaging lecturers, researchers, and actors from civil society organizations in identifying the topics to be discussed in the VE and in preparing the weekly material which will activate the youth in their community.

10. Conclusions

In this chapter, Virtual Exchange has been presented as a multifaceted concept, an approach, and a practice, offering a wide array of benefits. VE provides valuable opportunities for interactive learning, networking and skills development. Various formats of VE have been explored, with a particular emphasis on iOOCs offered by SPF. This examination has shed light on effective strategies to offer young people who are geographically separated, a genuine intercultural experience. Hereby this chapter has tackled the decisive role of facilitation for ensuring the aspired outcomes of the VE: Trained facilitators are essential to support dialogic discussions on contested topics and fruitful collaboration and to promote the engagement of the participants in their community. Examining the integration of VE into formal education and featuring examples from various universities that have seamlessly incorporated it into their academic curricula, this chapter underscores how VE has paved the way for broader adoption and the exploration of its untapped potential.

The showcased project being implemented in Palestine for social reconciliation stands as a promising milestone for a wider application of Virtual Exchange as a powerful tool for peace education and reconciliation processes. Through VE, participants engage in online dialogue, immersing themselves in a culture that encourages openness towards ‘the other’ – and indeed, any ‘other’ – while actively seeking a change in perspective. VE programs have a transformative impact on the participants themselves and through them on their wider community. The attitudes and skills gained through these programs unlock doors to lifewide learning, influencing and reshaping their everyday lives.

27 CBPA is an approach “in which stakeholders or community members become active participants in many phases of the research—helping to determine the problem, assisting in the design of the research questions, collaborating in data collection and analysis, and serving to disseminate the results” (Creswell, 2014, p. 17).

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