

# Teaching Life Writing in a Virtual Exchange Project: Evaluating the Impact on Students' Learning

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## Abstract

One aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic shared by universities around the globe was that pedagogical solutions had to be found amidst lockdowns and campus closures to ensure the continuity of existing programmes. One response was the creation of new modules in the academic year 2020–21 for students whose mobility plans (Erasmus+) had been derailed. To this end, the authors designed a module to bring some of the intercultural and foreign language learning benefits inherent in the year abroad into the student's virtual learning space. This paper will discuss the Virtual Exchange module and present findings from this pilot project.

## Keywords

Erasmus+; Virtual Exchange; Life Writing and Biography; Qualitative Research Methods

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## 1 Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE), also known as Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE), or for many years simply as telecollaboration, primarily involves internet-mediated intercultural engagement between classes in geographically distant locations or cultural contexts under the guidance of expert facilitators or educators (cf. Guth, Helm & O'Dowd 2014; Nishio, Fujikake & Osawa 2020). Indeed, in Higher Education, VE is well recognised as one of the most significant online pedagogical strategies for developing Foreign Language (FL) communication skills and intercultural awareness (Curtindale, Krylova & Minyurova 2020; O'Dowd & Dooly 2020; O'Dowd & O'Rourke 2019). O'Dowd and Dooly (2020) point towards the need to further advance the process of virtual exchange to make it a more efficient tool for developing intercultural competence. Recognising the need for ongoing research in the field, this paper explores the learning experiences of (Irish) students in an Irish-German VE and considers if a replacement VE module can be regarded as an effective alternative to the Erasmus+ exchange programme. It also hopes to add to the existent corpus of knowledge pointing to the potential multi-faceted outcomes of VE project collaboration including, but not limited to, language learning and intercultural awareness.

Looking back on over 20 years' experience and scholarship, VE is recognised today as a convincing way of pursuing various goals in the classroom in addition to the promotion of FL skills, such as foster-

ing intercultural competence (Lenkaitis, Calo & Venegas Escobar 2019; Varo Varo 2021), intercultural communication skills (Belz & Müller-Hartmann 2003) and culture-specific awareness (Curtindale, Krylova & Minyurova 2020). In a recent study, Nishio, Fujikake and Osawa (2020) found that in addition to learning FL skills, the motivation to learn a foreign language was improved as the social process itself revealed personal significance and increased desire to learn. Other studies have found critical thinking (Batardiè 2015; Von der Emde, Schneider & Kötter 2001) and digital literacy (Helm 2014) to be outcomes associated with a VE. More recently, O'Dowd (2020) has argued that VE can be a vehicle for promoting global citizenship's core values, such as respect for diversity, non-discrimination and solidarity for humanity. One further growing area of interest in virtual exchange has been its value as a pre-mobility endeavour to prepare students for a stay abroad (e. g. see Lee & Song 2019; O'Reilly 2021), and even as a replacement for the year abroad itself (see Hilliker 2020).

This research asks what learning outcomes may be triggered and realised within a VE, and to reflect if this pedagogy may be considered an effective replacement or alternative for non-travelling abroad students. After a brief introduction to the project and the research design demonstrating how the students collaborated and how data for this paper were gathered, the findings of the project will be presented. These primarily derive from the authors' reflections during the VE through the lens of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

(SoTL) (cf. Felten 2013) and drawing on Grounded Theory (cf. Groat and Wang 2002) to analyse student's work. This paper concludes with a discussion of findings including lessons learnt, and suggests improvements to future iterations of the module.

## 2 Description of the Virtual Exchange Project

The aim of the VE module was to replicate some of the authentic communication scenarios inherent in the Erasmus+ programme; to namely give students at University College Cork the opportunity to learn directly about German life and culture from first-hand experiences of working with a student peer at the University of Applied Sciences in Dresden. The intention was also to give students, who under other circumstances would have been on a Year Abroad (YA), an opportunity to speak German and grow in confidence using their German skills. These are some of the core goals of the Erasmus+ programme, which aims to "foster[s] the development of social and intercultural competences, critical thinking and media literacy" (European Commission 2021). In recognition of the goals of Erasmus+ and also in light of the wide-ranging outcomes evident in VE research, it was hoped that the VE would meet some of these learning outcomes echoing the multifaceted nature of VE as a whole.

The task was to link two different modules from two different study programmes: At University

College Cork, students attended the compulsory module “Virtual Project-based Life Writing: An Irish-German Project”. At the University of Applied Sciences in Dresden a voluntary course “Erasmus+ Virtual Project Life Writing Through Technologies” was duly created. Before the VE could commence, several discussions took place over a period of six months (April-September 2020) regarding the implementation of the module, concerning, for example, the alignment of the semester calendar, issues around assessment and use of virtual collaboration technology.

In terms of course content, the primary focus of this module was Life Writing (LW) and biography. LW, a term which has been used since the eighteenth century (Winslow 1995, 37), is an umbrella concept that captures the (non-fiction) writing of memories and experiences, whether of self or of another. One example and mode of LW is biography. Following the meaning of the term “*bios*” (life) and “*graphein*” (to write) from the Greek (Winslow 1995, 8) and “narrative” as “the recounting of a story; the story-telling element, which varies considerably in individual biographies” (Winslow 1995, 43), students were to capture the biography of their partner as their partner told it in German. They could use English where they could not think of the German word or expression. In completion of the assignment, students were to conduct three interviews during the month of November. They understood that the exercise was to find meaningful connections between the words said and the context of experience. Hence, in advance of the data collec-

tion, students were introduced to concepts of life writing, biography, qualitative research and carrying out biographical/narrative interviews. Input was provided by both authors on how to conduct qualitative interviews with room for discussion (in English and in German). Additionally, as the project was to be presented via an e-portfolio (Canvas™) or a blog (WordPress™), short instructional videos were created on how to set up the e-portfolio feature within Canvas and on how to write a personal blog with WordPress. None of the students had any prior knowledge of e-portfolios or creating blogs prior to the module. It was also the first time that students carried out interviews and the first time that they had to analyse interview transcripts in a formal way. As part of the assignment, students were encouraged to use qualitative content analysis using either thematic categories or in-vivo coding to understand the life experiences of their peers.

A key practice was keeping a weekly meeting with their lecturers so that students had a sounding board to discuss emerging issues or air any concerns. This approach reflects students’ need for guided reflection and opportunities to discuss their experiences with others (cf. Engbert & Jourian 2015, 15).

### 3 Research Design: Sample, Data Collection and Analysis

Eight students took part in the first iteration of the module: In Cork, three students, 2 male and 1 female,

were currently completing a dual degree in Bachelor of Commerce (International with German), and a fourth student was an Arts student of World Languages (female). The average age of the Irish students was 20.5 years. In Dresden, four students from the Bachelor’s degree program ‘Social Pedagogy and Management’ participated in the VE (1 male and 3 female), and their average age was 23.5. As mentioned, research presented in this paper is based on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) paradigm which is widely understood as a systematic and methodologically-supported reflection of one’s own teaching. The analysis is based on information-gathering exercises including written feedback in questionnaire format, coursework submitted and oral feedback. This multi-focal lens is referred to as triangulation:

*“[M]ethodological triangulation involves a complex process of playing each method off against the other so as **to maximize the validity of field efforts**. Assessment cannot be solely derived from principles given in research manuals – it is an **emergent process**, contingent on the investigator, his research setting, and his theoretical perspective” (Denzin 1970, 310; bold italics added).*

Triangulation provides a more differentiated view of the teaching and learning experience, strengthening the validity of the results, and is summarised in an overview format in Table 1.

Specifically, this included: 1. Anonymous written feedback (collected in a questionnaire using Microsoft Forms on the learning experience after week 6 and week 12). 2. Student projects submitted via an e-portfolio or blog that were completed in the weeks 4 to 12 (submission shortly after week 12). All projects were to include post-interview reflections and reflection on the learning process and, finally, 3. Oral in-class group discussion via Zoom: The finale of the project was an Irish-German virtual session before the Christmas break where students spoke about their projects and their learning experience in the presence of their interview partners (this was not graded). During this final session, open-ended oral feedback on the collaboration was collected. This was not analysed qualitatively but flowed into the overall SoTL/teaching and learning reflection of the VE findings and underlined the analysis of the written work in an oral format. Above all, it served to reinforce in person the learning outcomes evidenced in class throughout the semester.

The interpretative methodology chosen for the analysis of student's written work was Grounded Theory, which involves the "use of an intensive, open-ended, and iterative process that simultaneously involves data collection, coding (data analysis), and memo-writing (theory building)" (Groat & Wang 2002, 181). The grounded theory approach, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), requires the researcher to develop common or contradictory themes and patterns from the data which can be used as a basis for interpretation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe

**Table 1:** Data Collection and Sources

Data Format	Method	Digital Tools	Type of Data	Timeframe (semester weeks)
Anonymous feedback (written)	Questionnaires	MS Forms™	Student self-reflection	Week 6 & Week 12
Student projects (written)	Qualitative Interviews (3 per student)	E-Portfolio & WordPress (blog)	Student course work, critical self-reflection	Weeks 4–12
In-class discussions (oral)	Group Discussion	Zoom	Open-ended feedback	Week 12

1991, 105). This process necessitated the reading and re-reading of the written work using coding and category-building (details in Section 4). As data are read and re-read, categories form and interconnections can be made. Recognising the value of quotations, sample excerpts from the work submitted are given below. Any references to students' names have been changed to protect anonymity, and the annotation follows the format of a random student number only.

## 4 Results

The main findings were derived from a systematic application of the steps of qualitative analysis as a part of the SoTL approach (described above), and included the

- reading and re-reading all the written data (see Table 1);
- comparing the data with a view to establishing similarities, differences and contradictions;
- creating relevant codes using thematic coding and in-vivo coding;
- establishing overarching thematic headings from the previously created codes;
- summarising headings into main categories.

**Table 2:** Main and Sub-Categories

Main Categories	Sub-Categories
Language Acquisition	i. Student's self-perceptions of their German language skills and feelings of apprehension ii. Language, communication and conversational skills
Cultural, Personal, Social and Intercultural Learning	iii. Immediacy to the German culture iv. Personal learning and increase in confidence v. "Friend for life" or the hope of continuing contact with their peer vi. The Erasmus+ experience: Conditions for (inter)cultural learning
Critical Reflection of Methodology	vii. Interviewing process: (a) Self-disclosure and the role of culture (b) Shared experiences (c) Interviewing insights
Transferable Skills	viii. Increase in transferable skills, such as digital literacy skills

## Language Acquisition

**i.** On one level progression in German was very much tied to self-reported *feelings of apprehension* concerning the module and using the FL. This module was new in its applied pedagogical approach, and several times students used the words "felt challenged" by the assignment.

The noticeable levels of emotional *Angst* also had to do with the unknown variable of meeting a stranger online to discuss their life-stories for graded coursework.

*"Prior to my first interview with [my peer], I was extremely nervous, mainly because I didn't think that my standard of German was good enough to main-*

*tain a steady conversation with a native speaker. I was also nervous because it was our first-time meeting together [...]. I told [my peer] about the nerves I had regarding my level of German and [they] [were] completely understanding of this". (Student 1)*

However, with each interview nerves decreased, and an increasing level of confidence and enjoyment could be seen.

*"[...] I feel more confident in myself with regards to speaking the German language and getting to know new people. These lessons will stay with me for life". (Student 2)*

Students felt at ease to speak in English when they could not find the German words and were surprised about German students' good command of English.

**ii.** On another level, as the weeks progressed, there was also a sense of *growing ease of language, communication and conversational skills* as familiarity grew:

*"I feel that the module really aided my communication skills and analysis of conversation through German. I feel that I am now more confident, diligent and capable of holding an in-depth conversation through German". (Student 2)*

*"I also found it very beneficial to be able to practise German outside of the classroom". (MS Forms, anonymous)*

## Cultural, Personal, Social and Intercultural Learning

**iii.** The VE opportunity, and the interviewing process, provided an avenue for students to *learn about the German culture* as a result of direct and immediate exposure to members of the culture:

*"[My peer] was both open and willing throughout the course of our meetings, and I learned more from [them] about German culture and life than I could have done from a lifetime of reading books. [They] spoke openly about the different aspects of German*

culture, both positive and negative and also about major events in [their] life, not shying away from any awkward or difficult questions". (Student 2)

"I thoroughly enjoyed it because it opened my mind up to new things/cultures/ideas that I had not experienced before". (MS Forms, anonymous 1)

Besides personal accounts, students also talked about topics relating to Germany: for example, the history of East and West Germany and current developments in society (e. g. right-wing movements, racism, drug use, etc.). Students also noted enjoying the proximity to a live German academic setting, while working with a German professor and being able to hear German between native speakers in class (2 students).

**iv.** In addition to growing in self-awareness, all students noted some degree of *personal learning* as they overcame the little challenges along the way.

"This project also showed me how significant going out of your comfort zone and challenging yourself can be. [...] I am glad to have done something new and initially frightening because it taught me how much you can gain from challenging yourself". (Student 4)

There was a notable *increase in confidence* levels associated with the very individual and personal learning to each student "I grew as a person and increased my

confidence" (Student 3), and the VE was perceived as an opportunity to enable personal growth and to reflect on one's "own flaws and improve myself". (Student 4)

**v.** A further surprising finding (in the eyes of the students) was the fact that *they formed friendships* while doing their assignments, echoing a clear social learning component of the VE:

"[...] this project has been a great experience. I have made a great friend for life out of this project and that is something I will treasure forever. [...] I found the whole process so interesting and eye opening. It is something that everyone should try experience in their lifetime. I am very grateful I got this opportunity". (Student 3, italics added)

Another student summarises the friendship aspect in relation to the overall project:

"I gained a new friend from this experience, something that goes way beyond this simple study and I am thankful for that". (Student 2)

**vi.** Students compared the VE to the first-hand experiences that would have been gained during a YA in Germany. They all showed an appreciation for the *close connection of the VE to their perceptions of learning on an Erasmus+ exchange*:

"Since we couldn't go on Erasmus this year, a small bit of Erasmus was brought to our homes. I really gained an insight into the university life in Germany and how the year is structured with regards to exams, assignments etc. I also got to practice my German which was another huge benefit. Since we didn't get to move abroad, I am so happy this module was set up for us as a replacement". (MS Forms, anonymous)

"[...] I believe that I now have a greater understanding of the experiences I could have had while on my Erasmus in Germany" (Student 2)

## Critical Reflection of Methodology

**vii.** Concerning interviewing their peer, a surprising finding to all students from the outset concerned the willingness of their partner in Germany to **(a)** *disclose and divulge difficult aspects of their lives*.

"Something that I admired greatly about [my peer] throughout the three interviews was how open and honest [they] were about subjects that some people may have been sensitive about". (Student 1)

"[...] I found that [my peer] was very willing to discuss [their] early life including the loss of [their] father. I really appreciated how open [they] [were] about such a mournful time in [their] life". (Student 2)

*"I was surprised when [my peer] revealed an intimate experience of [theirs], reminding me of our lecturer pointing out how sometimes people reveal very private things about themselves". (Student 4)*

The sharing of personal aspects of their peers' lives was at times a little unsettling to the Irish students and brought about conversations in class about culture, e. g.

*"I had to admit during my reflection that this openness startled me at first as in my opinion Irish students would not be so quickly forthcoming on such personal thoughts and reflections" (Student 2).*

Although an integral part of the concept behind life writing itself, this sudden engagement with uncomfortable topics meant that students became more "self-aware" to use their words, and reflective as to the role that culture played in one's willingness to share personal information.

*"I found it challenging to adjust to the cultural differences during our conversations, particularly when we were discussing tougher topics [...]. I was taken aback at [my peer's] willingness to discuss such a personal topic during the first conversation, perhaps due to cultural differences, therefore, it wasn't until the final conversation that I felt I had become more self-aware and was capable of exploring such an unfortunate time in [their] life". (Student 2)*

**(b)** Another finding worthy of mention from the interview process, is also the observation of *shared experiences* particularly relating to social/environmental conditions students found themselves in. Life as a student at university during the Covid pandemic was shared and appreciated (2 students):

*"It was reassuring to hear that a student in a different country also faced these worries, as well as the equivalent struggles of wearing a mask to carry out everyday tasks. [...] Having both experienced firsthand the effects of Covid-19, as we both contracted the virus at roughly the same time, it is reassuring to compare stories and our recovery process". (Student 2)*

**(c)** The interviewing process itself revealed several *learning insights* and triggered a level of deep reflection. On one level during the interviewing process, students had an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge about methods discussed in class on qualitative research interviews regarding questioning, active listening and self-realisation in the interrogative process:

*"[...] the experience was greatly enhanced using the Qualitative Research interview techniques. I believe vital to being a good interviewer is the upfront trust building, being interested and engaged at all times, and using the interview techniques such as open questioning, active listening and regular check-*

*ins to ensure I understood the comments". (Student 2)*

*"By writing the reflection and later analysing the calls, it helps realize where your problems are in your interviewing skills, such as I talked too much sometimes". (Student 4)*

All students found the process of carrying out qualitative interviews enriching and insightful. The interview process also meant that students learned how to engage with the written word and how to analyse interview transcripts (e. g. re-listening to the recordings, coding procedure).

**viii.** Finally, students commented on the fact that they *acquired new transferable skills* to other life and career contexts (3 students). Digital literacy skills and mastering little challenges in using new technologies brought a sense of satisfaction, e. g.: "I enjoyed creating an interesting portfolio of my work" (Student 2), and "Learning to use WordPress™ will also be a valuable skill for the future" (MS forms, anonymous, 4).

## 5 Discussion

With the help of SoTL lens, and a Grounded Theory approach, an analysis of the findings shows that the virtual exchange opportunity did present a highly effective tool, to use the words of Ryan (2020), to imitate in

part some of the authentic communication situations that students would have encountered during their YA. All participants wrote that the project and the meaningful communication that ensued has given them the self-belief to further speak the foreign language and improve their language skills after this module, echoing the study of Nishio, Fujikake and Osawa (2020). There was also evidence of heightened self-awareness and the role that culture plays on communication. This related in particular to the content or “what” was discussed and the willingness on the part of the German students to disclose personal information. Hence, the findings point to the fact that the VE project provided a virtual classroom where (inter-)cultural awareness and language communication skills were developed echoing the literature discussed in the introduction. As Ryan (2020) asserts in an explorative study, this is exactly the finding that one might hope for arising from a virtual exchange and could later prove to be extremely valuable when students travel overseas (Ryan 2020). Returning to the purpose of this module, namely, to ask if a VE could be considered as a part-replacement or alternative for the Erasmus+ exchange programme, the findings demonstrate that a VE does provide the conditions to foster some of the learning outcomes of the Erasmus+ programme: social and intercultural competences were main findings of this project, and critical thinking about self as well as media/digital literacy were also evident (cf. European Commission 2021). We did not test the degree of the different competencies and the analysis was

based on how students perceived their skills development based on self-ratings. However, a notable and unequivocal finding is that virtual exchange as a pedagogical tool did provide the conditions for students to develop some of the skills that are inherent to the goals of the Erasmus+ programme.

The findings also point to the fact that the concepts of life writing and biography proved very worthwhile, although surprisingly, students did not explicitly mention the concepts later, suggesting that they saw the overarching themes as a theoretical backdrop rather than being to the fore of their minds. Additionally, the VE offered a platform for the practical and real-life exploration of the theoretical concepts, allowing students to move past superficial exchange to a much deeper interaction. Thus, the marriage of the concepts of life writing and biography within the context of virtual exchange yielded an opportunity for personal learning and reflection of self within a specified cultural context.

One reason for the high level of satisfaction with this course may have to do with the personal connection that all students felt to their respective peer. Students appreciated not being rushed, and especially the openness and high levels of self-disclosure in interview, as noted one student remarked feeling “very trusted then” (student 4). Students were matched based on interests and hobbies expressed in advance of the pairing, which in hindsight, may have been a decisive factor for the rich learning that the pairings yielded. The feedback does suggest however that

there was a lot more work required of students than a typical 5-credit module, and that the interviews (including transcribing and analysis) were very time-consuming. From this feedback, in future iterations of this module we are increasing the credit points to better reflect this workload. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that German students contributed in this project solely as interviewees and the virtual exchange project was voluntary for them. Going forward, we will give consideration to shared workload and alternating roles, as it would be a more enriching experience if students could contribute both in the role of an interviewer and interviewee, and where a change of role and perspective is required. Finally, in relation to the engagement with the umbrella concepts of the course, further readings on life writing and biography will be added to the module to help draw out more engagement of these constructs prior to the empirical part of the project, as well as asking students to consciously reflect on these readings in the feedback.

## 6 Conclusion

This VE module teaching life writing through technology was a departure from traditional undergraduate courses familiar to the students, and from a review of the work and the feedback submitted, learning outcomes outweighed initial expectations. Within the formal classroom, students learned about concepts of life writing, narrative interviewing, qualitative content



analysis, and how to use digital tools for presenting and showcasing their work. It was, however, outside the formal learning structures during the interview process itself that a reflective journey of self and other took place. Nevertheless, classroom time offered the space for a safe and critical discussion (cf. Engbert & Jourian 2015) and was an important part of the learning process.

The findings show that learning was multi-layered and evident on a number of ways comprising not only FL skills, but also personal, social, and cultural learning outcomes; from a notable increase in confidence and enjoyment meeting their German peers, to more self-confidence speaking German, and culture difference noted in the conversations sparked a questioning mindset and a desire to understand the other. Overall, it was found that the development of self-confidence went beyond the use and role of the language, to an increase of confidence in unknown social settings, and personal growth, so that the term “self-development” must be seen in broader terms as one of the main findings of the collaboration. With the opportunity for travel being cancelled, students not only appreciated the opportunity to work with German peers, but they saw direct overlap of the YA remit and the VE learning outcomes at the end of the course. They appreciated learning how to create a personal blog and an e-portfolio and the usefulness of these digital skills for future contexts. A surprising finding was the connection felt to their peers, with long-term friendships expected

due to the collaboration, reflecting the recent study by Curtindale, Krylova and Minyurova (2020).

Potential limitations of the results and reflections presented in this paper must also be mentioned, and relate to the small sample size, their limited validity in other contexts, and space restrictions in this publication. They do, however, point to the value of VE for simulating intercultural mobility scenarios, and to the wide-ranging learning outcomes that can be attached to such collaborative classrooms. In addition, regarding the base size of the sample and the frequency of their thematic occurrence as mentioned by the participants, sufficient data was collected to validate the main categories (cf. Guest, Namey & Chen 2020).

The concluding words will belong to a participating student and point to the self-empowering nature of the overall learning in the Virtual Exchange:

*“I have learned a lot from this entire process. I never knew how much a University [sic.] module could impact my life. I genuinely have increased my self-confidence in ways I didn't even think were possible. If you asked me to interview somebody in German last summer, I would not have been able. The pressure and fear of being incorrect would have taken over. Now I feel I will try to use my German language as often as I can. I have realised I know more than I thought. This is a great wake up call to receive. It has opened my eyes and made me realise I had the language all along and that I can achieve anything I put my mind to”. (Student 3)*

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