

Safe/brave spaces in virtual exchange on sustainability

Malin Reljanovic Glimäng¹

Abstract

This article explores the potential for fostering critical intercultural and global awareness through Transnational Virtual Exchange (TVE) focused on sustainability. The study is based on a lingua franca exchange between university students in Argentina, Poland, and Sweden. A qualitative content analysis of student e-portfolios unveiled reflective dimensions construed here as safe/brave spaces, echoing Andreotti's (2006) notion of soft versus critical global citizenship education. Using theories of critical interculturality and third space, the analysis shows potential for developing participants' critical reflection through TVE. However, the findings also reveal how in-depth reflection is often a lonely endeavor, overshadowed by project tasks that might unintentionally steer learners toward safe topics and consensus. So far, critical reflection is an underexplored area in empirical Virtual Exchange (VE) research. Student voices in this study bring to the fore questions regarding what it means to approach global citizenship education critically through online collaboration. The findings have implications for future design of VE projects where the focus is on social change through action-oriented tasks, but where critical and dialogic reflection *after* the completion of a pedagogical task is the salient part.

Keywords: virtual exchange; critical interculturality; global citizenship education; sustainability.

1. Malmö University, Sweden; malin.glimang@mau.se; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8774-6902>

How to cite this article: Reljanovic Glimäng, M. (2022). Safe/brave spaces in virtual exchange on sustainability. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 5, 61-81. <https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.5.38369>

1. Introduction

“This kind of project can really open up other ways of thinking, you see the bigger picture, [...] but I wish we would have been able to dig deeper” (student in Sweden).

Interculturality continues to gain international attention in higher education (e.g. [López-Rocha, 2021](#)). This is particularly evident from the range of frameworks and guidelines produced by transnational organizations such as the Council of Europe and UNESCO ([Helm & Acconcia, 2019](#)). However, [Porto and Byram \(2015\)](#) stress that while “states and international organizations [...] are beginning to see the need to educate global citizens, they do not include in their conceptualization the idea that citizens should be critical” (p. 24). One way to foster critical intercultural awareness among university students is through VE² as a conduit for exploring global topics in transnational settings ([O’Dowd, 2020](#)). This is in line with researchers’ recognition of VE as a method to internationalize the curriculum and “educate graduates who will be able to live and work in the globalized world” ([de Wit, 2016](#), p. 75).

So far, critical interculturality remains an underexplored area in VE practice ([Helm, 2016](#)). Common use of conventional content areas often downplays complexity, risking perpetuation of superficial perspectives on otherness and the world. [Helm \(2016\)](#) calls attention to “phatic exchanges between learners” (p. 151), where tension is intentionally or unintentionally avoided at the cost of deeper engagement and understanding. A counteraction is to promote critical perspectives and Transnational VE (hereafter TVE) with a focus on global citizenship education, to explore social justice agendas and align tasks with the UN sustainability goals ([Hauck, 2019](#); [O’Dowd, 2020](#)).

This practice-oriented study explores a trilateral TVE involving students from Argentina, Poland, and Sweden around sustainability and the UN Agenda 2030³. In transnational teams, students researched grassroots initiatives and official sustainability projects relevant in their respective cities. Each team subsequently co-created multimedia campaigns promoting sustainable actions. The exchange intended to support participants’ intercultural perspectives through an action-oriented task focusing on sustainability, however the findings reveal tension between task and critical reflection. The following research question guides this study: in what ways did a TVE on sustainability foster participants’ critical intercultural awareness?

2. The study uses the following definition of VE: “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 takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators. VE combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology” ([EVOLVE Project Team, 2020](#), p. 20).

3. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

2. Background

2.1. Critical interculturality through global citizenship education in VE

This article reports on an exchange reflecting [O’Dowd’s \(2020\)](#) model of TVE and Global Citizenship Education (GCE). TVEs⁴ focused on GCE topics can offer particularly rich contexts for eliciting critical interculturality while also engaging participants in promoting change for social improvement. As such, this model moves away from more traditional VEs, which have sometimes tended to gloss over complexities by foregrounding ‘safe’ project topics such as “family, pastimes, festivities, sports and music” ([Helm, 2016](#), p. 151). TVE embraces wider multilingual and intercultural collaboration anchored in real-world, sociopolitical issues. Critical intercultural reflection was an anticipated outcome in the TVE under study, however whether and to what extent students experienced this is at the center of this study.

Published research on ways in which participants experience critical reflection specifically related to GCE in VE is limited. One example is [Porto and Yulita’s \(2016\)](#) study of students in Argentina and Great Britain exploring the Falkland War and creating leaflets aimed at promoting awareness-raising around the historical conflict. In another place-specific study, [King de Ramirez \(2021\)](#) demonstrates how collaborative VE between students located in the borderline region of Arizona-Sonora facilitated critical citizenship awareness of local and global connectedness. Yet another example is [Lenkaitis and Loranc-Paszylk’s \(2021\)](#) exploration of how a lingua franca VE offered opportunities for participants to develop global citizenship awareness through problem solving linked to ideology.

Although the intricate debates around different conceptualizations of GCE are beyond the scope of this article, some brief background ideas are included here. Neoliberal discourses commonly frame global citizenship in terms of educating entrepreneurial individuals for a global workforce, whereas a liberal cosmopolitan paradigm rests upon assumptions of essential, universal human values and ethics ([Lilley, Barker, & Harris, 2017](#)). The present study takes a point of departure in [UNESCO’s \(2014\)](#) broad definition of GCE as the aim to “empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world” (p. 15).

An additional conceptual layer emerges through the work of scholars grounded in critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory who interrogate discourses of universality and conventional understandings of GCE by exploring ways ‘to think otherwise’ ([Stein & Andreotti, 2021](#)). This position entails

4. The abbreviation TVE is used in this text (and further detailed in the methods section) to distinguish transnational virtual exchange from other forms of virtual exchange as outlined by [O’Dowd \(2020\)](#).

interrupting hegemonic discourses, masking of global complexity and perpetuation in education of ideologies rooted in coloniality (Stein & Andreotti, 2021). In her seminal article ‘Soft versus Critical Global Citizenship Education’, Andreotti (2006) unpacks a range of general assumptions and argues for a critical approach to GCE. In VE research, this paradigm resonates with the work of Hauck and Helm (2020), who promote a social justice agenda through VE. Their framework is discussed below.

2.2. Theoretical framework: critical interculturality in safe/brave glocal spaces

Commonly construed by theorists in the field as polysemic and situated, interculturality defies static definitions (e.g. Dasli & Diaz, 2017). Dervin and Jacobsson (2021) capture this fluidity of the concept:

“[i]nterculturality can be regarded as moving beyond stable cultural categorisations as explanations for social behavior, to analyse and clarify how diversity and difference is brought into contexts and made meaningful by those involved in the encounters [...], interculturality never stops, there is no end to it” (p. 93).

Furthermore, Dervin (2017) conceptualizes interculturality as a realistic and liquid interactional process, emerging through the notion of *simplicity*. The continuum between *simple* and *complex* suggests that “as human beings, we have no choice but to encounter the Other through limiting, reducing ‘us’ and ‘them’ [...] while opening up our eyes and capturing moments of complexity in the way we perceive ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021, p. 84). Rather than striving to abolish essentialism – an idealistic aim according to Dervin (2017) – a realistic approach means recognizing how reductionist and static discourses of culture and identity operate in different contexts. In moving beyond the simple toward the complex, interculturality becomes a critical metaperspective in engaging with our own and others’ perspectives of the world (Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021).

This approach to interculturality and GCE merges with critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). Drawing on Freire’s theories, Andreotti (2006) considers ‘critical’ as, “a level of reading the word and the world that involves the development of [...] critical engagement and reflexivity: the analysis and critique of the relationships among perspectives, language, power, social groups and social practices by the learners” (pp. 6-7). In line with Freire (1970), she perceives critical reflection as the consciousness of interpreting the world through inquiry. Ferraz (2019) further clarifies critique as “disruption in our interpretative habitus [...] as meaning making process, and as suspension/mistrust of established truths” (p. 196).

Furthermore, the notion of *third space*, as betweenness, sheds light on the hybridity of VE engagement (Helm & Acconcia, 2019). Already a decade ago, Dooly (2011), drawing on postcolonial theories,

argued for a “need to reconsider what ‘intercultural’ means within a ‘third space’” VE context (p. 319). From [Bhabha’s \(1994\)](#) postcolonial perspective, the “third space of enunciation” as the *in-between*, is rooted in power, and allows agency to “speak of Ourselves and Others” while “emerging as the other of ourselves” (p. 24). Adapted for this study, the third space metaphor is twofold: it describes the online transnational dialogue shaped by students, negotiating identities and meanings; and, it forms the reflexive dimension and potential transformation that occupying the third space might offer participants.

Regarding thirdness, *glocalization* provides an additional useful concept in the context of online exchange and GCE. [Guilherme and Menezes de Souza \(2019\)](#) use the term *glocal* to illuminate how local and global “are not in a dichotomous relationship but closely intertwined with each other” (p. 5). Moreover, the concept entails interrogating that which appears as universal while unveiling the epistemic positions we are speaking from – our loci of enunciation. [Menezes de Souza \(2019\)](#) describes *glocalization* as the ongoing process of challenging the single narrative by “re-localizing the global” and “provincializing the apparently universal” (p. 23). In the TVE under study, the collaborative exploration of sustainability was designed to generate dialogue and critical *glocal* perspectives. Nonetheless, project design and student participation alone do not ensure critical reflection. Thus, this study explores tensions between ‘safe’ hegemonic and ‘brave’ non-hegemonic notions in student reflections. It is to this framework we now turn.

This study draws on [Hauck and Helm’s \(2020\)](#) perspectives on hegemonic versus non-hegemonic forms of VE. The two categories are made distinct for analytical purposes, whereas they overlap in practice. The findings are organized around the notion of *safe* (hegemonic) versus *brave* (non-hegemonic) space and relate to the following features derived from [Hauck and Helm’s \(2020\)](#) framework. Hegemonic forms of VE, construed here as *safe spaces*, involve: (1) acquiring specific sets of skills or body of knowledge, (2) ‘surfing’ diversity to establish a pleasant environment, (3) seeking compromises for the sake of completing collaborative tasks, (4) masking or ignoring power imbalances to focus on universal values, and (5) assuming global north perspectives. In contrast, non-hegemonic forms of VE, or *brave spaces*, entail (1) listening and learning as reciprocal processes, (2) creating possibilities for un/relearning, (3) making participants’ locus of enunciation matter, (4) disrupting monolithic worldviews to ‘relocalize the global’, and (5) aiming to challenge and transform participants through VE interaction ([Hauck & Helm, 2020](#)).

Echoing [Dervin’s \(2017\)](#) theory of simplicity discussed above, *safe* and *brave* spaces are in a similar way not dichotomies but rather the simple and complex on a continuum. Moreover, in critical VE, epistemological humility – that is, the realization of one’s own world view as limited

and situated – is a precondition for moving from safe to brave, and simple to complex intercultural understandings (Hauck & Helm, 2020).

In this study, notions of critical interculturality, third space, and glocalization converge in the exploration of students' reflections related to safe and brave space. Critical agency in the vein of Freire (1970) marks the making of TVE into a potential brave space where dialogue fosters relearning and new understandings (Hauck & Helm, 2020). However, this is challenging work, and only student voices can unveil whether and how participants in this TVE moved beyond safe spaces to engage in critical interculturality.

3. Method

The present qualitative study explores the second iteration of a trilateral TVE between student groups in Argentina, Poland, and Sweden. Designed as exploratory practice (Müller-Hartmann, 2012), the author took on the dual role of teacher and researcher. Through action research, the intent was to change and improve practice through cycles of design, action, observation, reflection, and re-design (Norton, 2009). The study thus aims to contribute insights through merging theory and practice in “analyses that enable practical wisdom and space for transformation” (Tracy, 2010, p. 846).

3.1. TVE design

As noted above, the abbreviation TVE is used by the author in this text to indicate a design reflecting O'Dowd's (2020) principles for a TVE for GCE aimed at;

- “1. Creating opportunities for rich intercultural interaction...
2. Establishing partnerships across a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and using lingua franca for communication with these partners
3. Encouraging learners to engage with themes which are of social and political relevance in both partners' societies
4. Enabling students to work with their international partners to undertake action and change in their respective local and global communities
5. Including ample opportunities for guided reflection of the intercultural encounters...
6. Being integrated and recognized part of course work and institutional academic activity
7. Increasing awareness of how intercultural communication is mediated by online technologies and [...] shape the creation and interpretation of messages” (O'Dowd, 2020, p. 487).

Moreover, the six-week TVE followed a three-stage task sequence (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009). The main objective was to develop participants' critical intercultural awareness. Since sustainability was relevant for all three disciplines (see below), the teachers aligned the project with the UN Goal 11, focused on making cities sustainable.

The main TVE task was action-oriented. In transnational teams, students first researched urban sustainability challenges and, subsequently, designed educational campaigns equally relevant in the three cities on sustainability actions such as promoting clean air and water, saving the bees, recycling, and campaigning for women's safety in urban environments. In promoting change, the intent was to extend intercultural communication to involve action as per the TVE model:

“[g]lobal or intercultural citizenship approaches go further and involve learners either instigating change in their own societies based on their collaborations with members of other cultures or actually working with members of other cultures as a transnational group in order to take action about an issue or problem which is common to both societies” (O'Dowd, 2020, p. 486).

The project incorporated various digital tools. Beyond the shared learning platform, each team selected tools for three purposes: (1) (a)synchronous communication (e.g. WhatsApp, Zoom), (2) a workspace (e.g. Google docs), and (3) co-creation of a multimodal campaign (e.g. social media, website, etc.).

3.2. Participants

The TVE involved participants from three universities and three different disciplines. Students in Argentina ($n=21$) studied multimodal communication, students in Poland ($n=21$) studied tourism, and participants from Sweden ($n=12$) were pre-service English teachers. The students were prompted to consider ways in which team members' disciplinary knowledge and skills would contribute to the collaboration. Participants were randomly organized into ten international teams with one to three representatives from each institution.

The exchange was conducted in English as a shared language with varying proficiency levels; however, the TVE foregrounded content and communication, rather than language acquisition, and the participants were encouraged to use multimodal and multilingual resources to convey meaning in online interactions. The opportunity to collaborate in English was important, however the central aim was to engage students in discussions around glocal sustainability goals and realities.

3.3. Data and procedure

The data derive from participants' e-portfolios. The teachers designed the e-portfolio as a downloadable template with questions to prompt students' reflections in response to the project tasks. Upon completion of the exchange, students submitted the e-portfolios to their teacher as part of course work. Subsequently, names and any other personal identifiers were removed. One e-portfolio per institution and TVE team was randomly selected. This amounted to nine portfolios from each institution and a total of 27 texts. In the text, the participants are referred to as for example A1 (Student 1 in Argentina), P1 (Student 1 in Poland), or S1 (Student 1 in Sweden).

The students consented to sharing their e-portfolios for research purposes and received information about research aims and individual rights to withdraw at any point of the study. Data were gathered, anonymized, processed and stored in compliance with GDPR and regulations stipulated by the participating institutions.

Qualitative content analysis was used to process the data (Saldaña, 2016; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The procedure involved coding and organizing data into categories and themes. The analysis entailed stages of close reading and self-reflection to identify emerging patterns in the data, and through systematic coding of recurring themes. The author carried out the final analysis, informed by theory and corroborated through member-checking with two practitioner researchers involved in the TVE (Tracy, 2010). Table 1 outlines the themes brought forth in the analysis.

Table 1. Thematic categories

Settling in safe spaces	Toward brave spaces
a) Seeking compromises	d) Reflecting glocally
b) Sharing and learning	e) Decentering
c) Getting the task done	f) Un/relearning

4. Findings and discussion

The following section responds to the research question, in what ways did a TVE on sustainability foster critical intercultural and global awareness? The section is organized into two parts: safe (hegemonic) and brave (non-hegemonic) spaces (Hauck & Helm, 2020). The first section analyzes three themes: (1) seeking compromises, (2) sharing and learning, and (3) getting the job done. The second section discusses three additional themes: (1) reflecting glocally, (2) decentering, and (3) un/

relearning. The themes derive from qualitative content analysis of student e-portfolio reflections (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

4.1. Settling in safe spaces

4.1.1. Seeking compromises

In the context of this study, seeking compromises indicates ways of “avoiding divisive topics rather than exploring differences and negotiating global misunderstandings” (Kramsch, 2014, p. 304). Overall, students describe sustainable development as a challenging yet rewarding TVE theme. They perceived the discourse as complex. For instance, P1 notes, “I have never liked the topic of sustainable development because it was difficult for me to express myself on this topic (sometimes even in Polish)”. Linguistic barriers, limited time, and hesitation to approach sensitive issues affected how students negotiated and selected topics for transnational collaboration. As exemplified by S1, most groups opted for manageable and safe topics.

“Most of us choose to focus on a topic that might be easy and comfortable to discuss [...]. I realized that this short amount of time is not enough to discuss a topic that might be sensitive to some and the fact that we were total strangers who merely wanted to have a pleasant group dynamic, made it impossible [...] to discuss a topic for which we could have been more emotionally invested”.

Some participants expressed frustration about having to settle for compromises. S2’s reflection is one example: “I want to dig into deep discussions about politics and learn more [...] right away. But I realized that that is not possible [...]. Instead I have to appreciate the exchange as it is”.

Nevertheless, students found the negotiation process rewarding and revealing. Identifying a common topic was challenging because of the different sociopolitical contexts in the cities. A5 notes, “I learned the different perspectives that each country takes to deal with [sustainability] and how each citizen and society is concerned or not about these issues”. P1 realizes how, “[a]t the beginning, the topic of sustainable development was difficult for us, but when we focused on one topic (public transport), it was easier”. Even simple topics opened for complex global perspectives and exposed how Goal 11 is not a one-size-fits-all but must be understood in relation to local conditions around the world. This was, however, *acknowledged* by the participants rather than explored in-depth. Further scaffolding and a modified task design might have helped extend discussions beyond the *what* and toward the *how* and *why* of global differences.

The complexity of the sustainability theme – in combination with linguistic obstacles, limited time, and a reluctance to push for what might be controversial issues for some – steered students toward seeking consensus and common ground in safe topics (Hauck & Helm, 2020). However contrary to what others have described as an ‘illusion of commonality’ (Ware & Kramersch, 2005) students in this study recognize the dilemma of glossing over complexities, and moreover, some voice frustration about playing it safe, or, in Andreotti’s (2006) words, staying at a soft level of GCE.

4.1.2. *Sharing and learning*

Another pattern in the data reflects Hauck and Helm’s (2020) descriptors of hegemonic forms of VE that (unintentionally) promote fact-finding, and a static body of knowledge while steering learners to ‘surf’ differences. Whether located in Argentina, Poland, or Sweden, most students were not familiar either with Agenda 2030 or with Goal 11 prior to the project. The topic is nevertheless seen as relevant, or even eye-opening. P3 writes, “when working together in an international setting, it’s easier to see your own country from a different perspective”. P6 highlights, “due to the fact that we live in totally different places, each of us had a different view of [...] Goal 11”. Researching and comparing local sustainability initiatives is seen as a rich learning opportunity. P5 describes how “each of us chose a campaign promoted by local organizations related to Goal 11 [and] we learned a lot about different projects we wouldn’t have known about otherwise”.

Sharing and exploring facts was an intended, and essential, part of the task sequence. As A2 stresses, “I learned a lot of facts about the environment that I didn’t know, like the air pollution in Buenos Aires”. S9 writes: “What was most interesting was that even if the world has come together around AGENDA 2030 [...] every country is still so different and has different ways to succeed with Goal 11”.

Nonetheless, the question of criticality remains. Collecting and comparing information is a key component in VE focused on sustainability and GCE. However, unless coupled with problematizing perspectives, VE practices run the risk of promoting awareness-raising of global issues under the guise of what Andreotti (2006) frames as an attitude of “we are all equally interconnected [and] we can all do the same thing”, while masking “asymmetrical globalization” and ignoring sociopolitical and historical aspects of power (p. 6).

4.1.3. *Getting the task done*

Perceived through the lens of hegemonic forms of VE, intercultural learning is compromised when participants are prone to managing diversity for the sake of completing the task (Hauck & Helm,

2020). For the action-oriented TVE task, each team co-created a semi-authentic campaign advocating sustainable actions. The activity is described as *semi*-authentic because, although co-created for real audiences on real issues, this was still a pedagogical task, evaluated by instructors and completed as part of course work. The VE ended with an online exhibition displaying the campaigns, followed by a reflection activity. The general student satisfaction with the task is captured by P2:

“I’m very pleased with the result achieved, we managed to realize most of our ideas and show them to the world. Other campaigns were also very interesting and inspiring! I was looking at them with curiosity and learned new information. Campaigns about clothes and women’s equality rights particularly touched me, [but] I admire all the ideas that were used to create these multimedia campaigns”.

Students were very positive about the products; however, several teams also experienced conflicts toward the end. As specialists in multimodality, students in Argentina were puzzled when the interlocutors were ready to compromise quality to meet the deadline. A4 reflects,

“[t]his bothered me a lot [...]. I feel like they just wanted to get rid of what they had to do, without taking us into consideration [...], everything started quite well and the companions were always very kind, but the situations of the last two weeks left me with a bad taste [...], there are [...] certain ways of behaving that European people have that I think don’t match much with Latin Americans”.

The interdisciplinary feature of this TVE brought this critical incident to the fore, and A4 and other students in Argentina sought explanations for interlocutors’ behaviors in the dichotomy of the global south/north. This incident held powerful potential for critical and explicit intercultural discussions; however, unfortunately the task sequence ended with the display of the campaigns, leaving no time for a deeper, interactive process. Consequently, the project design unintentionally amplified a task-oriented, performing-for-the grade attitude at the cost of more meaningful and potentially transformative learning (Freire, 1970). This tendency is not unique for this particular project. Helm (2016) highlights the challenge of achieving critical reflection in VE as students are inclined to seek compromises and consensus to avoid friction.

Meanwhile, students did also recognize co-creation, not as the project end-station, but as a springboard toward more nuanced, intercultural reflection. S7 writes;

“[e]ven if we came up with a really cool sustainability campaign that was inclusive and relevant for all of our respective countries, the campaign was always secondary to learning

more about [...] what potential differences we have, and also what surprising similarities we share, [it's] been incredibly rewarding for me!”.

In perceiving co-creation as the hands-on process that generates intercultural and global insights, Paula's reflection underscores the value of *both* safe and brave spaces in TVE. As [Andreotti \(2006\)](#) explains, taking action according to a soft approach “can already represent a major step” (p. 8); nonetheless, she argues, education must not stop there if the aim is criticality and change. Regarding TVE design, this calls for a stronger focus on collaborative reflection beyond the main task. The implication is a shifting emphasis in the task sequence to illuminate that co-creating campaigns (in the case of this TVE) constitutes *one form* of taking action intended as a pedagogical stepping-stone toward *another form* of action – namely the development of deeper understandings of self, other, and ways of engaging critically with the world ([Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021](#); [Freire, 1970](#)). [Freire \(1970\)](#) reminds us that “critical reflection is also action” (p. 126). It follows that concluding the VE with the action-oriented task stops short of critical potentials. This brings us to brave spaces.

4.2. Toward brave spaces

[Hauck and Helm \(2020\)](#) advocate turning VE into a dialogic brave space underpinned by the recognition of difference and willingness to explore uncomfortable issues linked to power, privilege, and inequality. This approach potentially fosters a third space for critical consciousness, agency, and transformative learning ([Bhabha, 1994](#); [Freire, 1970](#)). The question is whether and how the present TVE facilitated these qualities.

4.2.1. Reflecting glocally

Although grounded in online intercultural dialogue, students' critical perspectives unfolded mainly as an individual process in e-portfolios at the end of the project. At the nexus of the local and global, students' locus of enunciation, their localized knowledge, and the position from which they were speaking, play a crucial role in the collaborative exploration of sustainability ([Guilherme & Menezes de Sousa, 2019](#)). P9 writes,

“[w]hat surprised me the most was that while discussing the anti-smog act in Greater Poland, the [others] did not know [...] why it was created, why people in Poland burn garbage in chimneys, they had many questions about it. [...] I was able to [...] explain things that are obvious to us (Poles), and not to others. The project showed me for sure that something that is so normal for us, for others is something that we have to explain”.

As P9's reflection suggests, drawing on situated knowledge became revealing as she enacted intercultural mediation with interlocutors (Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021). Similarly, P1 describes how interlocutors "heard a lot about stereotypes related to Poland. And we tried to explain [...] I hadn't noticed it before, but the contact with people from other countries made me realize it". In contrast, P3 realizes how, although South America was completely foreign to him prior to the VE, "Poland and Argentina are unfortunately very similar", particularly concerning "abortion laws, the propaganda on the media, anti vaccinationists and the right-wing party".

A parallel story in the data is a global south perspective surfacing in the portfolios from Argentina. On the one hand, students pointedly address socioeconomic gaps and asymmetrical power relations between the global south and the global north (Andreotti, 2006). A4 highlights how, concerning sustainability, "there were things that [the Europeans] took for granted while it even seemed utopian to us". Similarly, A1 elaborates,

"[t]his crossing of perspectives is extremely rich because it is where the cultural differences are revealed, what is the norm for one country, is not for the other [and] our economic realities are very different. Thus, proposals that looked very viable in Poland and Sweden [...] we thought that in Argentina with 40% of the population below the poverty line, they are nothing more than a dream".

On the other hand, students in Buenos Aires also discovered that, while Agenda 2030 seemed an abstraction of the north, there are plenty of initiatives in Argentina. A1 continues,

"I was struck by the progress around certain points of [Goal] 11 in our country, [...] several of the goals [...] agree with movements that are being developed in our country, such as (the one that most interested me) the aim to improve the quality of life of people in poor neighborhoods through sustainable proposals".

This also entailed a grappling with Eurocentric notions attached to the north/south dichotomy as shown in A6's reflection:

"I found the proposal of the 2030 Agenda and [Goal] 11 interesting [...], there are certain global urgencies that affect all of us, but in different ways. We live in a very Eurocentric world (and country), in which third world countries are always [viewed as] 'backward' and 'developing', however there are issues on the 2030 agenda in which we are not so far removed from the European countries".

Global tension surfaces in Polish and Swedish e-portfolios as well, albeit in a different way. As exemplified by S9, one recurring concern was the sporadically failing technology in Argentina: “The guys from Argentina did not have good internet connection [...] so they could not talk in the meetings sometimes. Further, sometimes they did not even have internet so they could not connect to our meetings”.

Rather than a global problem that is talked *about*, unequal internet access directly impacted TVE collaboration. S2 recognizes how, in his team, failing connectivity became a question of inclusion when Argentinian students could sometimes only participate via asynchronous messages. “As someone living in Sweden, this became an important insight”, S2 notes, adding that access “should not be taken for granted, this gave me perspective”.

In subtle ways, the project did offer rich spaces for “troubling the singularity of the narrative, changing the terms of the conversation”, and recognizing that “the global is always someone’s local” (Menezes de Souza, 2019, pp. 22-23). Building on recent research (King de Ramirez, 2021; Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2021), this study shows how epistemic humility – realizing how our knowledge is always incomplete – is a core aspect of global awareness (Hauck & Helm, 2020).

4.2.2. *Decentering*

As shown above, glocal reflexivity entails gaining new perspectives through *decentering* – the ability to scrutinize that which we take for granted in our own culture and society (Dervin, 2017). Two additional and contrasting examples from the students’ reflections shine a spotlight on the notion of ‘thinking otherwise’ (Andreotti, 2006; Bhabha, 1994). The first example concerns privilege, voiced by S3:

“Sweden is often seen as this little bubble of perfection, and the generalization is sometimes even that we are superior [...], what does it do to you to think that you are so democratic and advanced? [...] During this project I thought about that a lot and how the global north is always trying to tell the global south what to do [...]. Sustainability is of course so important [...] but it’s really privileged to be able to get your hands on those issues [...]. They have a lot of poverty in Argentina, and is it really applicable to talk about sustainability if you are poor and unemployed? [...] Then how relevant are those issues? I became very much aware of that through this project”.

S3 interrogates what the study of sustainability means when power becomes visible. As many students realized, choosing a topic for transnational collaboration was not unproblematic; rather,

even seemingly simple issues inevitably laid bare complex socioeconomic differences. As indicated in previous excerpts, what appeared realistic from one cultural perspective seemed idealistic from another. This simplicity at glocal crossroads constituted fertile grounds for critical intercultural awareness (Dervin, 2017). However, issues linked to power also tend to create unease. Regarding *deCentering*, Holliday (as cited in Xiaowei Zhou & Pilcher, 2019) explains,

“I put a capital C in there [...] which is [...] the West or whatever, but it is a clear location of power, which is uncomfortable [...]. I don't think we would be honest with our students if we gave them the impression that this intercultural stuff is comfortable” (p. 4).

It follows that TVE participants would have needed time and scaffolding to cross the boundary of safe space and share potentially uncomfortable perspectives, stories, and questions with the team.

The second example concerns what might be described as awareness of a deficit mindset. A8 from Argentina ponders how, through TVE, she was “able to generate a critical vision” and scrutinize how “we always tend to think that things are better in other countries [...] but many times we think from ignorance”. Other students highlight the same pattern, as exemplified by A6:

“[r]egarding my own society and culture [...], the exchange helped me realize that we have a lot of proposals in which Buenos Aires tries to be sustainable, which perhaps in normal life escapes us [...] as we only contemplate the aspects that we lack. [But] first world cities also have things they need to [...] develop, it is not all as perfect as they make us believe [...]. I learned to look at my city with better eyes”.

S3, A8, and A6's reflections demonstrate a (self-)critical reading of the world from a particular locus of enunciation (Menezes de Souza, 2019). Here, a third space lens helps see “beyond the entities that interlocutors are conceivably ‘locked into’ toward a new site opened up between interlocutors” (Xiaowei Zhou & Pilcher, 2019, p. 4). Moreover, developing a polycentric vision “destabilises a one-sided Eurocentric perspective” (Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021, p. 17). The examples show decentering from different angles: on the one hand, a global north interrogation of the privileged gaze and, on the other, a looking back from the global south, questioning Eurocentric discourses and north/south dichotomies. The locus of enunciation “need not be *geographical*”, but as Menezes de Souza (2019) stresses, “it is always *epistemic*” (p. 29). Unsurprisingly, students' more in-depth reflections unfolded in their individual e-portfolios rather than openly *with* interlocutors. While this is expected, one can assume that a more explicit focus on sustainability linked to power, privilege, and difference would support participants in sharing more complex perspectives together – turning the whole project toward *critical VE*.

4.2.3. *Un/relearning*

Following from the above, the data shows how this TVE did, in fact, involve non-hegemonic features of unlearning and relearning (Hauck & Helm, 2020). Despite tendencies to sacrifice depth for the sake of avoiding friction and getting things done, students' reflections reveal instances of critical consciousness, a development through which they were challenged to see their existence *in* and *with* the world, not as static, but as reality and epistemology in transformation (Freire, 1970). This involves listening, speaking, and acting. Helm and Acconcia (2019) highlight how transformative learning has listening and reciprocity at its core. As P6 writes, “[w]e had to listen to each other well to understand ..., for me, the challenge was to adapt to someone else's [perspective], which at first seemed meaningless to me”. P6 explains how only through deeper reflection was she able to see and understand other views. Andreotti (2006) underscores how critical literacies assume understanding how knowledge is always incomplete and, “constructed in our contexts, cultures and experiences. Therefore, we lack the knowledge constructed in other contexts/cultures/experiences. So we need to engage with our own and other perspectives to learn and transform our views/identities/relationships – to think otherwise” (p. 7).

Furthermore, developing critical consciousness is a process of intercultural meta-thinking (Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021). S3 jokingly expresses disbelief about her own limited worldview when the project began: “[s]omehow I actually thought that everyone tries to recycle all over the world”. Likewise, S2 re-evaluates his initial assumptions about VE and realizes that “perhaps I did not gain what I first expected, but something else – a deeper insight about myself”. The data includes a range of examples of how self-discovery is at the core of un/relearning. S9 describes being challenged and changed in a personal way:

“I found my own voice in this digital space. I actually have not talked this whole year in regular seminars, not even in breakout rooms [...] I get very nervous. And then suddenly in this exchange [...] I really had to step up. When given this room to use my voice, and to lead, and to discuss, it just became easier and easier for me through the weeks [...]. Because I had to, and because someone wanted to listen. This is a breakthrough that I take with me. I'm not a talkative person, but this project made me feel welcome. In normal classes I feel that you have to know a lot of stuff to talk, but here the whole point was to interact and discuss to learn. It felt safe”.

For S9, online transnational dialogue turned out to be an empowering experience; it validated his voice, which was something he had been unable to find in other educational experiences.

Another aspect of un/relearning concerns taking action in the ‘real’ world, beyond the task of making campaigns. A7 describes how exploring sustainability issues in VE impacted her own life: “we began to recycle in my house, and we began to raise the idea of eating less meat”. Similarly, S6 feels that the project “opened my eyes”, as she reflects on gaining global awareness while also learning to “criticize current sustainability issues in my city”. Furthermore, she highlights the importance of taking action: “I believe by making others aware, matters come alive [...]. Which correlates to our project of making a campaign” (S6).

The data reveals how many participants did change in some way because of the TVE. Nevertheless, venturing into brave space became largely a silent, individual endeavor. As shown in the sections above, many students recognized this dilemma. This desire for more in-depth collaborative work is expressed by S1 in the title quote of this article:

“[t]his kind of project can really open up other ways of thinking, you see the bigger picture and that you are actually a global citizen [...]. But I wish we would have been able to dig deeper and deal with more critical perspectives in the group”.

What does it take to ‘dig deeper’ together then? As [Andreotti \(2006\)](#) stresses, it is about creating spaces where learners feel “safe to analyse and experiment with other forms of seeing/thinking and being/relating to one another” (p. 7). While this study illuminates critical perspectives in e-portfolios, the findings also call for pedagogical re-design and a shift in the task sequence to scaffold and bring forth criticality as a visible and more explicitly dealt with dimension in this kind of project. As recommended by [O’Dowd’s \(2020\)](#), VEs should include “ample opportunities for guided reflection” (p. 487). This study argues that guided and collaborative reflection should be the central component, following from co-creation.

5. Conclusion

This study illuminates the interplay between the hegemonic and non-hegemonic dimensions involved in a TVE where sustainability provided a GCE topic to elicit critical intercultural and global awareness ([Hauck & Helm, 2020](#)). Understood through a lens of simplicity, this VE clearly involved, and depended on, both dimensions ([Dervin, 2017](#)). However, whereas safe space was the visible, known, and shared level, reminiscent of the tip of the iceberg in traditional culture models, brave space, as critical intercultural and global awareness, mostly unfolded silently as an individual reflective process below surface. Obviously, in-depth reflection is an individual process;

nevertheless, bringing a larger portion of the iceberg to the surface prompts critical interculturality as a *shared dialogue* where participants, by way of their different locus of enunciation, challenge themselves and each other to think otherwise.

This study has implications for the design of TVEs, and the findings contribute to conversations on critical interculturality in VE research in three overlapping ways. First, the study highlights the simplicity (the simple/complex continuum) of fostering critical interculturality through GCE. Unsurprisingly, anchoring a TVE in real-world sociopolitical issues does not automatically ensure critical intercultural work in student groups. Students perceived sustainability as a complex topic requiring compromises due to limited time, language barriers, and fear of approaching potentially controversial issues. Consequently, most groups settled for safe topics rather than problematizing global issues underpinned by power. However, many participants did acknowledge this as a limitation. The findings call for deliberate use of safe space, not as the end of the project, but as a springboard to engage *collaboratively* with complexity. This highlights safe and brave spaces, not as dichotomies but as a continuum between simple and complex dimensions of critical intercultural awareness. Becoming aware of how the simple, essential, or seemingly universal operates can open ways to address cultural hegemonies (Dervin, 2017). In TVE on GCE, it becomes imperative to ask if we are “doing enough to examine the local/global dimensions of our assumptions” (Andreotti, 2006, p. 3).

Second, what does it mean to take action through a pedagogical task? This is worth scrutinizing, especially concerning GCE aimed at enhancing participants’ critical understanding of the world. An action-oriented pedagogical task might in essence be rather superficial, promoting “sloganizing” and “the illusion of acting” (Freire, 1970, p. 126). Nonetheless, the process of co-creating can be a powerful way of unveiling assumptions and generating critical inquiry. The real action-taking is reflection carried out in a brave space, while acknowledging epistemological humility as a prerequisite to critical awareness. The pedagogical task should be designed to facilitate the co-creation of brave spaces from which reflections in educational contexts can become actions in the real world.

Third, and more concretely, to allow for the above, the findings call for a modification of the T/VE task sequence. Student reflections indicate that, although designed as the main and final task, co-creating sustainability campaigns rather opened for a subsequent level of critical thinking and reflexivity. In other words, the activity of co-creating held potential for creating a critical (third) space for learners to explore meaning making, engage in decentering and unveil and question epistemological assumptions in un/relearning. Participating in a TVE is time-consuming and demanding, and too often online projects (not just this one) end hastily with the completion of a collaborative task and possibly a brief evaluation of the project. This study proposes a shift that foregrounds critical intercultural reflexivity over the action-oriented pedagogical task; thus, what

comes *after* co-creation should become the salient dialogic part according to a non-hegemonic approach to VE, and a critical approach to GCE.

6. Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my VE-partners Cecilia Magadán and Katarzyna Radke for the always rich and rewarding cycles of transnational collaboration.

References

- Andreotti, V. (2006). Soft versus critical global citizenship education. *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, 3, 40-51.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Dasli, M., & Diaz, A.R. (2017). (Eds.). *The critical turn in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: theory, research and practice*. Routledge.
- De Wit, H. (2016). Internationalisation and the role of online intercultural exchange. In R. O'Dowd & T. Lewis (Eds), *Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy, practice* (pp. 150-172). Routledge.
- Dervin, F. (2017). Critical turns in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: the simple-complex continuum (simplicity) as a new perspective. In M. Dasli & A. R. Diaz (Eds), *The critical turn in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: theory, research and practice* (pp. 58-72). Routledge.
- Dervin, F., & Jacobsson, A. (2021). *Teacher education for critical and reflexive interculturality*. Palgrave macmillan.
- Dooly, M. A. (2011). Crossing the intercultural borders into 3rd space culture(s): implications for teacher education in the twenty-first century. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 11(4), 319-337.
- EVOLVE Project Team. (2020). The impact of virtual exchange on student learning in higher education. EVOLVE Project publication. <http://hdl.handle.net/11370/d69d9923-8a9c4b37-91c6-326ebbd14f17>
- Ferraz, D. M. (2019). English (mis)education as an alternative to challenge English hegemony: a geopolitical debate. In M. Guilherme & L. M. T. Menezes de Souza (Eds), *Glocal languages and critical intercultural awareness: the South answers back* (pp. 183-206). Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *The pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
- Guilherme M., & Menezes de Souza, L. M. T. (2019). (Eds). *Glocal languages and critical intercultural awareness: the South answers back*. Routledge.
- Hauck, M. (2019). Virtual exchange for (critical) digital literacy skills development. *European Journal of Language Policy*, 11(2), 187-210.
- Hauck, M., & Helm, F. (2020, November). *Critical internationalisation through critical virtual exchange* [Video]. Critical Internationalization Studies Network. <https://youtu.be/S1EZL4DLjew>

- Helm, F. (2016). Facilitated dialogue in online intercultural exchange. In R. O'Dowd & T. Lewis (Eds), *Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy, practice* (pp. 150-172). Routledge.
- Helm, F., & Acconcia, G. (2019). Interculturality and language in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. *European Journal of Language Policy*, 11(2), 211-233. <https://doi.org/10.3828/ejlp.2019.13>
- King de Ramirez, C. (2021). Global citizenship education through collaborative online international learning in the borderlands: a case of the Arizona–Sonora Megaregion. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 25(1), 83-99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319888886>
- Kramsch, C. (2014). Teaching foreign languages in an era of globalization: introduction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 98(1), 296-311. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2014.12057.x>
- Lenkaitis, C. A., & Loranc-Paszylk, B. (2021). Facilitating global citizenship development in lingua franca virtual exchanges. *Language Teaching Research*, 25(5), 711-728. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168819877371>
- Lilley, K., Barker, M., & Harris, N. (2017). The global citizen conceptualized: accommodating ambiguity. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 21(1), 6-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315316637354>
- López-Rocha, S. (2021). Refocusing the development of critical intercultural competence in higher education: challenges and opportunities. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 21(1), 118-131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2020.1833900>
- Menezes de Souza, L. M. T. (2019). Glocal languages, coloniality and globalization from below. In M. Guilherme & L.M.T. Menezes de Souza (Eds), *Glocal languages and critical intercultural awareness: the South answers back* (pp. 17-41). Routledge.
- Müller-Hartmann, A. (2012). The classroom-based action research paradigm in telecollaboration. In M. Dooly & R. O'Dowd (Eds), *Researching online foreign language interaction and exchange* (pp. 163-204). Peter Lang.
- Norton, L. (2009). *Action research in teaching and learning: a practical guide to conducting pedagogical research in universities*. Routledge.
- O'Dowd, R. (2020). A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education. *Language Teaching*, 53(4), 477-490. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000077>
- O'Dowd, R., & Ware, P. (2009). Critical issues in telecollaborative task design. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 22(2), 173-188.
- Porto, M., & Byram, M. (2015). Developing intercultural citizenship education in the language classroom and beyond. *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 3(AJAL), 9-29.
- Porto, M., & Yulita, L. (2016). Language and intercultural citizenship education for a culture of peace: the Malvinas/Falklands Project. In M. Byram, I. Golubeva, H. Hui & M. Wagner (Eds), *From principles to practice in education for intercultural citizenship. languages for intercultural communication and education* (pp. 199-224). Multilingual Matters.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.), SAGE publications.
- Stein, S., & Andreotti, V. (2021). Global citizenship otherwise. In E. Bosio (Ed.), *Conversations on global citizenship education: research, teaching and learning* (pp. 13-36). Routledge.

- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- UNESCO. (2014). *Global citizenship education: preparing learners for the challenges of the twenty-first century*. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002277/227729e.pdf>
- Ware, P., & Kramsch, C. (2005). Toward an intercultural stance: teaching German and English through telecollaboration. *Modern Language Journal*, 89, 190-205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2005.00274.x>
- Xiaowei Zhou, V., & Pilcher, N. (2019). Revisiting the ‘third space’ in language and intercultural studies. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 19(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2018.1553363>
- Zhang, Y., & Wildemuth, B. M. (2009). Qualitative analysis of content. In B. Wildemuth (Ed.), *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science* (pp. 308-319). Libraries Unlimited.

Published by University of Groningen Press | UGP, a not-for-profit press
Groningen, The Netherlands | UGP@rug.nl

© 2022 UNICollaboration (collective work)
© 2022 by Authors (individual work)

Journal of Virtual Exchange 2022
Edited by Carolin Fuchs and Müge Satar

Publication date: 2022/07/22

Journal of Virtual Exchange (JVE) is an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal aimed at practitioners and researchers in the field known variously as virtual exchange, telecollaboration, or online intercultural exchange. It is the official journal of UNICollaboration (<https://www.UNICollaboration.org/>), the international academic organisation dedicated to supporting and promoting telecollaboration and virtual exchange in higher-level education.

Rights. The whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence ([CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)); individual articles may have a different licence. Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer. University of Groningen Press does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this article. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this article is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither UNICollaboration nor University of Groningen Press can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. Additionally, the publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While University of Groningen Press is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice. Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material. Every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this article. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this article.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net (<https://research-publishing.net>)

Noto fonts are open source. All Noto fonts are published under the SIL Open Font License, Version 1.1. Noto is a trademark of Google Inc. (<https://www.google.com/get/noto/>).

ISSN: 2647-4832 (online only)