Using Autoethnography in e-Tandems for Fostering *Gloçal Cultural Awareness*: An Irish-German Virtual Exchange[1]

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Abstract

Autoethnography, the narrative exploration of one's own cultural context and experience, has been proposed as a pedagogical method of tapping the knowledge of diverse groups of students for mutual cultural learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). With this in mind, we set up a virtual exchange (VE) between second-year students from the University of Galway, Ireland, preparing for their Erasmus year in Germany, and students studying Irish literature and culture in their final year at a northern German grammar school. In this exchange the students themselves were to complete an autoethnographic task. The VE showed that autoethnography can serve as an instrument to address some of the problems that O'Dowd (2006) identified while using ethnographic methods in telecollaboration: the emergence of an asymmetrical relationship with conflicting roles and communicative styles, overgeneralisation, and the inability to suspend judgement. Furthermore, autoethnography as a dialogic form appears to be more appropriate than traditional ethnographic methods for Global Education, which, in contrast to Intercultural Learning, does not mainly aim at *understanding* other cultures distinct from one's own, but at preparing students for "effective *interactions* across cultures" (OECD, 2018, p. 10, our emphasis) in a highly connected, endangered global society. By moving between the individual and the cultural, students can become aware of different but also interdependent local, national, transnational, and global cultural

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structures in which they live, partly connecting them to and partly distinguishing them from each other.

Keywords: Foreign language learning (German & English); Global Education; e-tandem; autoethnography

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1.   Introduction

Since the 1990s, language learners have often been cast in the role of ethnographers, as active explorers of cultures, and ethnography has been introduced as a method of foreign language learning (König, 2020). In the present virtual exchange (VE) project we experimented with a specific method of ethnography, namely autoethnography.

Traditionally, an ethnographer was seen as a researcher who visits and observes a group of people from a different culture, taking field notes and describing the group's ideas and practices in texts addressed to readers from his or her own cultural context (e.g., Daynes & Williams, 2018). Over a long period of its history, ethnographic discourse tended to follow "the pattern set by […] *studies of nature*" (Rappaport, 2014, p. 13) and was dominated by an "objectivity paradigm" (Stodulka, 2021, p. 102). Ethnographers attempted to erase or at least reduce the contingency of their cross-cultural encounters as well as their own and their subjects' individuality by generalising and drawing abstract conclusions from their personal experiences. The ethnographic text aimed to provide an atemporal description and explanation of cultural systems that was supposed to allow readers an understanding of the objective, hidden logic of another culture.

Obviously, such an approach to intercultural communication poses epistemological and political problems which have been widely discussed since the 1980s, resulting in "calls for ethnographic writing that is experimental, dialogic, multivocal and polychronic" (Stodulka, 2021, p. 102). Autoethnography is one of the methods that emerged from this debate. In contrast to older ethnographic writing, autoethnographies are personal accounts in which researchers either write about their own culture or describe their individual encounter with members from other groups and cultural contexts (e.g., Boncori, 2022; Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). Participants in autoethnographic projects are seen as partners rather than subjects; autoethnographies can contain participants' own narratives or can be written in cooperation with them. Texts are composed as "stories" in first-person narratives. This allows the writer to move between "multiple layers of consciousness": backward

and forward in time, outward into larger social formations, and inward into the intricate entanglements of the self (Ellis, 2004). While autoethnography has become a widespread *research* method in language teaching and cultural learning (e.g., Stanley, 2020, Yazan et al., 2021) and is also used in teacher training (e.g., Mihan & Voerkel, 2022, Yazan, 2022), it still seems to be much less common as a *pedagogic* method in language classes (a rare exception, apart from Kumaravadivelu [2008], is Liao [2022]).

In one of his many insightful studies, O'Dowd (2006) describes the application of ethnographic methods in a VE project between American and German university students. On the one hand, he notices gains of knowledge of the target culture and improvements regarding skills of interpreting and relating as well as skills of discovery and interaction (based on Byram's [2008] concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence). On the other, O'Dowd (2006) evaluates the results less positively as far as attitudes and critical cultural awareness are concerned. Like other researchers (e.g., König, 2020), he writes that his learners tended to overgeneralize their findings. Moreover, his German students repeatedly showed a lack of readiness to suspend disbelief about their partners' culture and belief about their own. On several occasions, they left the neutral, scientific role of the ethnographer behind in order to judge and criticise their partners' ideas and practices. O'Dowd (2006) proposes two explanations for these problems: First, he criticises the impossibility of reproducing the asymmetrical relationship of ethnographers to their objects in his exchange. Second, O'Dowd (2006) argues that his German students resorted to a direct, combative communication style, typical of German culture, but incompatible with the ethnographer's role (2006).

Although many VE projects contain elements that could be described as autoethnographic in a broader sense, we are not aware of any systematic usage as an ethnographic method. Even though autoethnography may not completely solve the problems pinpointed by O'Dowd (2006), it transforms them by offering a different context and pursuing different goals. By conceptualising the partners as participants in rather than subjects of research, autoethnography offers a more dialogic, symmetrical relationship that might correspond better to the situation of VE than traditional ethnography. Thus, comparison and discussion of divergent cultural ideas and practices can be considered a vital part of the autoethnographic process instead of a negative side effect. Furthermore, autoethnography emphasises the individuality of both autoethnographer and participant, as well as the individuality of their encounter. Autoethnographers present themselves in first-person narratives and depict unique events with individuals in time and space; they are not forced to be representative of a whole cultural system so that generalisations can be offered as hypotheses and reflections rather than being the prerequisite for arriving at valuable knowledge (Ellis, 2004).

Finally, intercultural learning, as it has been conceptualised since the 1990s (e.g., Byram, 2008; Kramsch, 1993), is based on the idea that language learning can be considered as the encounter of two distinct, separable entities: the learner's culture and the target culture. However, cultural systems are heterogeneous and contested spaces (Kim, 2020, p. 521) and many students live in hybrid and multiple cultural contexts. What is more, the students' and the target cultures are connected in diverse ways and on various levels by mutual influences and common structures and elements, and students face shared political, cultural, social, and ecological challenges (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic or the climate change crisis). Autoethnography is a method and genre of writing that can capture these cultural complexities (Kumaravadivelu, 2008) and appears to be particularly valuable for Global Education, which emphasises the global connections between cultures and asks for the integration of political and ecological global issues into language learning (Wehrmann, 2021).

The VE we conducted both as teachers and researchers was a first, very openly constructed attempt to explore the potential of autoethnography as a method of cultural learning in e-tandems. Following their individual interests in their partner's cultural contexts, students reflected on their own ideas and practices in autoethnographies and then sent them to their partners in order to initiate a process of comparison and discussion in video conferences. Our main objective was to enable the students to experience and to represent cultural contexts as "glocal", as being specific to their locality but also globally connected in many complex ways. Due to institutional restrictions, we did not record the video conferences but we evaluated the exchange based on online surveys, reflective essays, and the autoethnographic texts themselves.

2. Context

The VE project connected groups from different levels of education: a German language course of second-year Commerce International students taught by a lecturer at an Irish university, and an interdisciplinary bilingual (English-German) final year course on Irish culture, history, and literature taught by a secondary school teacher at a grammar school in Northern Germany. The idea for this VE emerged in the late summer of 2020 at rather short notice when the German group's educational journey to Ireland had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic (the authors already knew each other, as they had worked on their doctoral theses at the same university). Accordingly, the German students were particularly interested in first-hand experience of the target cultural context and in authentic encounters with young people from Ireland. Similarly, the Irish group of students were keen to meet and communicate with young people from Germany in preparation for their Erasmus+ exchange in the following year.

The group from Germany consisted of 19 students, four of them with a migration background, with Hungarian, Kurdish, Dutch, and Turkish as their first languages and German as their second language. Their proficiency levels in English ranged between B1 and C1, while the proficiency levels in German of the 16 students in Ireland ranged roughly between A2 and B2. Three students had a migration background with a bilingual upbringing or a native language other than English, namely Lithuanian, Russian and Italian. The students in Germany and Ireland had a similar age range, roughly 18-20 years, since students in Germany tend to complete their second-level education a year later than their peers in Ireland.

3.   Objectives

The focus of the present VE was cultural learning within a framework of Global Education (Wehrmann, 2021). Cultural learning is a necessary element of language learning (Kim, 2020), the main objective of the course in Ireland, while the bilingual module in Germany was particularly designed for cultural learning.

In order to break up the "self/other-binary" (Blell & Doff, 2014) underlying the paradigm of intercultural learning, an alternative to Byram's (2008) concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence has been developed for Global Education (OECD, 2018), which is, however, not completely attuned to the needs and specific accomplishments of foreign language learning. In the OECD model of "global competence", similarly to Byram's "critical cultural awareness", four "target dimensions" are placed in the middle and surrounded by subordinate aspects – "knowledge", "skills", "attitudes" and "values" –, which are supposed to be prerequisites for reaching the "target dimensions": (1) "examine local, global and intercultural issues", (2) "understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others", (3) "engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions across cultures" and (4) "take action for collective well-being and sustainable development" (OECD, 2018, p. 7-11). Yet critical evaluation of ideas and practices in Byram's sense is not part of these target dimensions, while a contested political and ecological concept – "sustainable development" – is included as a self-evident global goal. Furthermore, the model tends to separate abilities and issues rather than aim at elucidating their connections. Knowledge about culture, social and economic development, environment, and human rights are described as distinct "domains", whereas many conceptualizations of Global Education consider learning about the interconnectedness of global issues (Scheunpflug & Schröck, 2000; Selby, 2000) as one of the most important aims of the educational movement. Thus, our term *glocal cultural awareness* seeks to serve as a provisional stand-in for a comprehensive model of global competence in the foreign language classroom. The usage of "glocal" instead of

"global" refers to the description of globalisation as a "glocalisation" (Robertson, 1995) and emphasises the simultaneity and interdependence of cultural practices and structures on different levels (e.g., individual, local, regional, national, transnational, global).

Glocal cultural awareness is a specific kind of critical cultural awareness suitable for a globalising and ecologically endangered world. It involves:

- an awareness that culture is a complex network of semiotic, material and biological relations and structures that can be described on different levels/scales;
- an awareness that the individual is an agent in these structures and communities, determined by them, but also (re-)constructing them;
- global mindedness, a commitment to global and intergenerational justice (various *ideas* of justice are possible);
- the ability to analyse and evaluate glocal situations in which problems or conflicts arise between individuals, groups or organisations with culturally and/or functionally different perspectives, ideas and practices;
- the ability to act responsibly in such situations.

The goals of the VE were to help students:

- gain knowledge of young people's life in the partner's country;
- improve their skills of interpreting and relating, as well as their skills of discovery and interaction;
- raise glocal cultural awareness and explore each other's places in complex cultural networks of different scales, rather than consider each other as representatives of a different national culture. Moreover, students were encouraged to perceive individuals as agents in these structures and communities.

4.   Project Design

The autoethnographic texts were prepared before the first contact with the exchange partner or partners. The participants were asked to identify a subject they wanted to know more about with regard to their exchange partner's country. They would then reflect on and proceed to write about this subject in their own cultural context. Thus, for instance, students in Ireland interested in learning more about nationalism in Germany had to write about the role of nation and nationalism in their own lives and cultural context.

Accordingly, we ascribed various functions to the autoethnographies:

- They were intended to activate prior knowledge focusing on the students' own cultural context.
- They served as a vantage point of developing significant questions and as a basis for the comparison of ideas, experiences and practices.
- We hoped that the genre would encourage students to write in a deeper, self-reflective manner.
- The fact that they would be asked to write in a foreign language could – so we thought – help students to distance themselves from their own cultural context and to prepare them for mediating between different cultures.

First, we informed the students about the various steps of our exchange and introduced them to the methods of autoethnography and e-tandem (see Appendix I). We also told them that we intended to evaluate and publish the results and asked for, and received, permission to use anonymised quotations from the various texts. Then we selected the e-tandems randomly and let the students start the exchange by contacting their partners by email. Due to the different sizes of the groups, we formed three groups consisting of one student in Ireland and two students in Germany who were willing and appeared to be (socially and linguistically) competent to work in this format. In their initial email they introduced themselves and sent their autoethnographies to their partner(s). Both groups discussed the emails and autoethnographies they had received in their respective courses and prepared the first virtual meeting, in which the partners talked about their text in the language in which it was written. Our role as teachers was to guide discussions, help with language problems, and act as advisers in the classroom. However, we were not present during the individual meetings between the participants, which took place on the German school's virtual online platform. The students met in video conferences of at least 40 minutes. They were expected to divide the talking time evenly between English and German. The second meeting, which took place about a week later, was intended to cover a broader range of topics about the students' everyday lives and the students were invited to talk about questions that might have popped up after the first meeting. As a final step, both groups were assigned essays in the main language of their country of residence in order to reflect on the exchange and were asked to fill in an anonymous online survey about the exchange. Both the autoethnography (Appendix II) and the reflective essay (Appendix III) formed part of the students' assessment.

For their autoethnographic texts the students were free to choose any topic they were interested in, but they did receive some guidance in the form of sample texts that were discussed in class. The students in Germany discussed an excerpt from Hugo Hamilton on his German-Irish childhood and the students in Ireland looked at shorter texts written by people in Germany about their individual

Christmas traditions. These texts may well have impacted the students' topic choices as several students in Germany chose to write about their hybrid identity, partly with reference to Hamilton's text, while the exploration of Christmas traditions was a particularly popular choice among the students in Ireland. An evaluation of the outcomes can be found in Appendix VI.

5.   Student Feedback

Overall, the exchange was rated very favourably by the students. Both groups considered the autoethnographic texts an important element of the exchange, improving its intensity and quality. It is also noteworthy that the vast majority of the students on both sides stated that they would like to stay in touch with their exchange partner. The slightly greater enthusiasm on the part of the students in Ireland suggests that the exchange had a more immediate beneficial effect on them as they were preparing for their Erasmus year in Germany. The following representative statements sum up the generally positive response on the part of the students in Ireland, suggesting, for instance, that the exchange should be "permanently implemented in the course" as "it is a great experience to learn about the variances in culture but also, it provides a first-hand insight into the language itself and allows you to practise your communication skills through German". Moreover, students considered that they had "gained valuable insights into various aspects of German culture and traditions", that the exchange boosted their confidence, and that it made them feel "excited for" or at least "less nervous about" their Erasmus year. One student even claimed that the exchange "reduced my fear of the 'culture shock' many Erasmus students have told me they faced when they arrived to [sic.] their new country". Overall, the students felt that the exchange was a valuable experience and recommended that similar exchange projects should be offered in future.

6.   Conclusions and implications

On the whole, we consider the exchange a success that we hope to repeat. All students had a positive experience of an encounter with their peers from a different cultural context in which they effectively communicated through a foreign language. Our first objective – insights into young people's lives in the partners' country – seems to have been achieved in every tandem, although to varying degrees. All students also practised skills of interpreting and relating as well as skills of discovery and interaction. As we had hoped, autoethnography as a method effectively freed our students from the pressure to present aspects of their lives as representative of an Irish or German national culture and encouraged them to focus on their individual experiences more sharply. This, in turn, facilitated

questioning stereotypes and avoiding overgeneralisations in the video conferences and reflective essays. Moreover, autoethnography allowed us to include students with a migration background as equally or even particularly interesting voices. Combining autoethnographies with one-to-one communication via video conferences seems to have contributed to a friendly and open atmosphere in which similarities and connections between the cultural contexts were emphasised. This may have helped to prevent some of the problems O'Dowd (2006) identified when organising video conferences with the American and German students confronting one another in a group setting, a format which may have been an important factor in triggering the combative communication style he observed in the German group. At the same time, however, the open character of the tasks led to a perceivable loss of focus in our exchange. Over the course of the project, some students apparently lost track of what they initially wanted to find out about their partner's cultural context. Thus, although the design of the exchange and the use of autoethnography appear to have fostered a range of transferable skills like linguistic competences, cultural knowledge, communication skills and self-confidence, as well as a degree of glocal cultural awareness, this could have been achieved more effectively and systematically.

An undeniable limitation of the project was its relatively short duration of around six weeks, which allowed for only a short preparatory phase and limited the actual encounters between students to two virtual meetings. A longer timeframe would allow us to provide the participants with a broader range of autoethnographic examples, which would hopefully help them to better understand and navigate culture as a contested space of "heterogeneous practices, ideas and values" (Kim, 2020, p. 522). In order to unlock more of the potential of our method, autoethnography should be used as a process informing the entire exchange. In future exchanges, we would like to employ the cooperative element in autoethnography more consistently and effectively. Thus, the partners could collaborate to revise and expand their autoethnographic texts. Furthermore, the students could also write the final reflective essay as an autoethnography: as a first-person narrative of the encounter but with a clear focus on the field they intended to explore from the beginning. This is also the reason why we would like to structure the exchange more clearly and offer more scaffolding. Finally, the cooperation between the two groups as a whole could be intensified, by focusing on a variety of similar glocal issues in the respective target cultural contexts or by embedding the parallel cultural learning in a similar framework of Global Education.

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Appendix I: Schedule

Dates/Deadlines	Steps/Tasks
2 November 2020	Classroom discussion: Introduction to Autoethnography
16 November 2020	Discussion of autoethnographical draft texts in class: developing ideas for improvement
20 November 2020	Emails with rewritten versions of students' texts to be sent to their exchange partners (and to teacher/lecturer)
23 November 2020	Discussing the exchange partner's autoethnographies in class and developing questions for the virtual meeting
24 November – 6 December 2020	Two virtual meetings with exchange partner, self-organised
7 December 2020	Discussing and evaluating the results of the intercultural exchange
14 December 2020	Submission of reflective essays and anonymous evaluation

Appendix II: Autoethnographic Essays

What is autoethnography?

An ethnographer is a person who visits other people in distant countries and writes about their culture. In contrast, autoethnography means exploring and analysing your own cultural self. Ethnographers are outsiders who try to reconstruct a culture by observing what people do and say and by making generalisations based on that. Yet autoethnography is about individuals trying to make sense of her/ his personal place in the society she/ he lives in. It is a method that does not aim at generalisations (*the* Irish, *the* German culture) but at *individual* experiences. Sometimes these may be similar to the experiences of other people living in the same country, but often they will be quite different, at least in some respects, and autoethnography is also interested in these differences.

Task: Write an autoethnographical text on one aspect of your own life, about a field of experience you would like to know more about in the life of people in Ireland (500-1000 words, drawings or photos can be added) (until 16 November 2020).

If you are, for example, interested in how people in Ireland celebrate religious and national holidays, write a text about how you experience holidays in your life. Describe everything in such a precise and detailed manner that somebody from another cultural context could understand the particularities. Remember: this is about *your* experiences; you should not try to be representative of a group or a country. Do not only write about what happens but also your perceptions, thoughts and feelings on the subject. What does this aspect or practice mean to you?

Participants in Germany

Read this example: What aspects of life are described and in what way? How is personal experience expressed?

Hugo Hamilton: *The Speckled People* (2003)

Johannes, the narrator in Hugo Hamilton's autobiographical novel The Speckled People *(2003), grows up as the son of an Irish nationalist father and a German mother in Dublin/ Ireland in the 1960s. Johannes' father believes that Irish ought to become the only national language in Ireland although only a minority in the west of Ireland still uses it in everyday life. At home, the children are not allowed to speak English in spite of the fact that everybody else in Dublin uses this language; their father speaks Irish to them, their mother German.*

When you're small you know nothing. You don't know where you are, or who you are, or what questions to ask.

Then one day my mother and father did a funny thing. First of all, my mother sent a letter home to Germany and asked one of her sisters to send over new trousers for my brother and me. She wanted us to wear something German – lederhosen. When the parcel arrived, we couldn't wait to put them on and run outside, all the way down the lane at the back of the houses. My mother couldn't believe her eyes. She stood back and clapped her hands together and said we were real boys now. No matter how much we climbed on walls or trees, she said, these German leather trousers were indestructible, and so they were. Then my father wanted us to wear something Irish too. He went straight out and bought hand-knit Aran sweaters. Big, white, rope patterned, woollen sweaters from the west of Ireland that were also indestructible. So my brother and I ran out wearing lederhosen and Aran sweaters, smelling of rough wool and new leather, Irish on top and German below. We were indestructible. We could slide down granite rocks. We could fall on nails and on glass. Nothing could sting us now and we ran down the lane faster than ever before, brushing past nettles as high as our shoulders.

When you're small you're like a white paper with nothing written on it. My father writes down his name in Irish and my mother writes down her name in German and there's a blank space left over for all the people outside who speak English. We're special because we speak Irish and German and we like the smell of these new clothes. My mother says it's like being at home again and my father says your language is your home and your country is your language and your language is your flag.

But you don't want to be special. Out there in Ireland you want to be the same as everyone else, not an Irish speaker, not a German or a Kraut or a Nazi. On the way down to the shops, they call us the Nazi brothers. They say we're guilty and I go home and tell my mother I did nothing. But she shakes her head and says I can't say that. I can't deny anything and I can't fight back and I can't say I'm innocent. She says it's not important to win. Instead, she teaches us to surrender, to walk straight by and ignore them.

(From: Hugo Hamilton. *The Speckled People*. London: Fourth Estate, 2003. pp. 2-3.)

<u>Annotations</u>
speckled (title) *- gefleckt, gesprenkelt, gescheckt*
Aran sweaters - sweaters from the Aran Islands in the west of Ireland, where Irish is still spoken. Originally, the sweaters were water-resistant.
Kraut - a pejorative slang expression for somebody from Germany

B) Participants in Ireland

Read this example: What aspects of life are described and in what way? How is personal experience expressed? Would more detailed explanations be required occasionally? Are there things you would have liked to know more about?

"Für mich bedeutet Weihnachten, wenn das Ganze nach-Geschenken-Gerenne endlich abgeschlossen ist, vor allem eine schöne und gesellige Zeit, die mit gewissen Traditionen erst richtig charmant wird. Dass alljährlich meine Oma über die Geschenke meckert, gehört genauso dazu wie der Umstand, dass unser Koch nach seinem traditionellen Frühschoppen unter leichten Koordinationsschwierigkeiten leidet. Ich finde, an Weihnachten verzeiht man die kleinen Dinge sehr viel bereitwilliger, man freut sich einfach, Zeit miteinander zu verbringen. Zum Ritual ist es außerdem geworden, dass ich mit meiner Mutter in den Spätgottesdienst gehe - nicht, weil wir besonders religiös sind, sondern mitunter weil es großen Spaß macht, sich über unsere schlechten Gesangsqualitäten zu beäumeln. Im Anschluss daran fahre ich dann immer noch vom Kaff in die nahe gelegene Stadt zu einer Weihnachtsparty im „Jazzkeller". Da kann man nicht nur ausgelassen tanzen und sich an einem aufgestellten Weihnachtsbaum Süßigkeiten und Schnapsfläschchen abpflücken, sondern all die lieben Menschen wiedertreffen, die man viel zu lange - vielleicht sogar seit der Grundschulzeit - nicht mehr gesehen hat." *Rebekka Farnbacher*
https://merkurist.de/frankfurt/persoenlich-was-bedeutet-weihnachten-fuer-mich_ZK6

Glossary
gesellig = sociable
meckern = to complain / nag
der Frühschoppen = morning pint
der Spätgottesdienst = midnight mass
beäumeln = laugh one's head off
das Kaff = small village / backwater

Appendix III: Reflective Essay

After the exchange, please write a **reflective essay** (in your native language) about your experience regarding the exchange.

This should include
- a brief summary of topics (autoethnographic essays and meetings)
- differences and similarities in Ireland and Germany
- aspects such as surprising/unexpected insights; communicative/intercultural difficulties or misunderstandings (regarding language or content) and how you handled these
- any other aspects you consider relevant
- overall evaluation of the experience

Scope: ca. 500-1000 words

Appendix IV: Evaluation of Outcomes

Our following evaluation of the outcomes of the exchange draws on the students' autoethnographic texts, their reflective essays about their individual experience of the virtual exchange, and their answers to an anonymous online survey designed by us and filled in by the participants upon completion of the virtual exchange. This survey included 12 quantitative questions about the

students' affective reactions to and views on various aspects of the exchange, such as whether they enjoyed the exchange, whether they felt they had gained any new cultural and personal insights, and whether they felt the exchange had improved their language and intercultural skills. It also contained an open question asking for students' recommendations for future virtual exchanges.

In particular, our discussion of the outcomes of this project will consider the extent to which this exchange has been successful in fostering the participants' glocal cultural awareness based on their self-assessment as well as on our thematic analysis of their autoethnographic and reflective essays. In our thematic analysis we largely followed the method of Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory approach, an evolving qualitative research method in which theoretical conclusions derive from the close analysis of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam & Grenier, 2019: 9). This method involves category-building through constant reading and re-reading of data, in this case the students' autoethnographic reports and reflective essays. The main categories that emerged in this process were the students' attempts to find common ground with their exchange partner as well as new insights into their exchange partner's and their own cultural contexts. Generally, the students in Germany tended to focus on more political subjects such as German nationalism and the importance of politics or religion in their lives. Some also focused on 'lighter' topics such as Christmas traditions or food. In contrast, the students in Ireland mainly chose to write about pastime activities, such as nightlife, sports, and music festivals, or national and religious holidays. One wrote about her own sense of national pride, one about gendered secondary-school subjects, one about limited career options outside higher education in Ireland, and one about superstitious beliefs.

In the following, we will pinpoint some examples of how the students dealt with these topics and discuss how successful the exchange was in furthering students' glocal cultural awareness in the context of Global Education.

Finding Common Ground

Looking for and emphasising similarities rather than differences is a strategy we noticed in several of the e-tandems. One e-tandem, consisting of one student in Ireland and two participants in Germany, discussed the theme of nationalism. In her autoethnography, the student in Ireland outlines how hurling, traditional music, and the Irish language instil pride in her and constitute an important part of her identity. In her reflective essay, she explains that she has "always been intrigued by the complexities surrounding German natives' attitudes towards this concept". She was particularly delighted that one of her two partners had written his own autoethnography about nationalism. As she notes in her reflective essay, "The dissonance between the sense of pride and love for one's country which pervaded my own essay versus the shame and self-confliction of his essay is extremely evident". However, this particular e-tandem also reveals how the students, despite contrary historical and personal contexts, seek to find common ground between their respective cultures. For instance, the description of teenagers in Germany thoughtlessly joking about Hitler and the Holocaust causes the student in Ireland to more critically interrogate the issue of nationalism in her own cultural context. She writes, "I felt similarities could be drawn between this and Irish teens, who often make sectarian jokes without even knowing their true meaning". On a more positive note, the students were also able to 'bond' over their pride in and enjoyment of culture across national borders. In response to her partners' interest in soccer and classical music as sources of national pride, the student in Ireland was pleased to reference her favourite German movie *Das Wunder von Bern* ('The Miracle of Bern') as well as a presentation on Ludwig van Beethoven she had prepared in her first year at her Irish university. In her reflection she concludes that "despite the blatant cultural differences regarding this topic, we discovered there were still some similarities and mutual points of interest to be found".

Gaining New Insights into the Exchange Partner's Culture

Many of the e-tandems provided insights into the intricate relation between the personal and the cultural as expressed in the students' cultural practices and personal views on subjects such as sports, education, and religious or national holidays. In some cases, this served to contradict or complicate the participants' preconceptions about their exchange partners' culture. One particularly clear example is an autoethnography on sport in Ireland. This student deliberately distances himself from the stereotype that the Irish are only interested in hurling and Gaelic Football. Instead, he identifies with Karate and with some of the (originally Japanese) values connected to the sport. In his reflection, the student tells us that his partners in Germany openly asked him why he wrote about a Japanese sport although he was supposed to deal with his life in Ireland. This illustrates a very national idea of culture on the part of the students in Germany, while the student in Ireland may show a more "glocal" understanding of culture. However, both students in Germany considered the ensuing discussion as a particularly enlightening experience that allowed them to gain more complex insights into the Irish cultural context as well as their own. As one of them puts it, "In the following conversation we came to similar conclusions on the German side: Although Germany is a football nation, none of the participants on the German side plays football". And he concludes: "A successful change of perspective was revealed here, which showed me how deeply stereotypes are rooted".

Gaining New Insights into One's Own Culture

In general, the students in Ireland, particularly, felt they gained new insights into their own as well as their exchange partners' culture. As one Irish student notes, "I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know [my partner], whilst simultaneously gaining insights into life in Germany and German culture, and surprisingly unearthing insights into Irish culture, many of which I had not considered before". This generally-formulated insight can be illustrated with some examples referring to discussions about political education, Christmas traditions, and hybrid identities respectively.

Several students in Ireland expressed their surprise at the strong interest in politics displayed by many of the secondary students in Germany and noted, as well as regretted, the lack of options for students in Irish secondary schools to learn more about politics or engage in political debates. One student notes with reference to her exchange partner, "I thought it was quite unusual for someone so young to be so interested in politics as I have not encountered anyone my age, in Ireland, who possesses the same passion for politics". Another student in Ireland reflects on how discussing the German school system with her partner "gave me a great insight into the way young Germans think in terms of politics and I think it is such a pity that politics isn't promoted more in schools in Ireland [...]".

In another e-tandem, in which German and Irish Christmas traditions were discussed, the student in Ireland was prompted to reflect on some alcohol-related Irish Christmas traditions such as the Twelve Pubs of Christmas or the College Christmas Day, which her German partners were surprised about. While her reflective essay does tend to generalise about *the* Germans and *the* Irish, she also notes how she was provoked for the first time to critically interrogate "these binge-drinking events" around Christmas when comparing them to the German students' views on Christmas as what she calls "a wholesome, family-oriented holiday".

Finally, the theme of hybrid identities was a topic popular with the group in Germany, particularly the four students with migration backgrounds. These students emphasise the sense of having to 'blend in' and write about experiences of discrimination, difficulties or feelings of unbelonging. In one e-tandem, the description of a Yazidi/Kurdish German student's experiences caused the student in Ireland to reflect more deeply about the situation of a former classmate, a Muslim girl who sometimes

wore a hijab to school, noting that, while the girl was not in any way openly bullied by her classmates, "I never stopped to consider how she must have felt in some of those situations. As a child, the fear of being perceived as any way 'other' can seem catastrophic, even to the point where you feel the need to hide part of who you really are". In this and similar discussions the ostensible subject of hybridity transformed into the micropolitical handling of cultural difference, and questions of identity led to questions of just treatment in transnational contexts.