6. Case studies: virtual exchange in action in initial teacher education

The following case studies are intended to provide a more nuanced and detailed insight into how virtual exchange functions in initial teacher education and to gain an understanding of the factors which shaped the learning outcomes of each exchange. These are also intended to provide the reader who is unfamiliar with virtual exchange with some accessible examples of how the activity works in practice.

The first of the case studies focuses on the intercultural learning outcomes of a Brazilian-Portuguese exchange which was carried out in Portuguese. The second, a German-Polish exchange, was carried out through English and the study focuses on the digital-pedagogical competence development of the students. Finally, the third exchange looks in detail at the foreign language learning experiences of Spanish and Swedish students who collaborated together.
6.1. A Brazilian-Portuguese exchange on the theme of inclusion in education

6.1.1. Classes involved

This case study involves a three-month long exchange between classes in Portugal and Brazil on the topic of inclusion in education. Both classes were at master level and students were studying special needs in education. The Portuguese class had nine students and the Brazilian class eight students. The Brazilian class also had a focus on sports education. Most of the students were also working part-time, which meant that they had limited time to dedicate to this project. The project received institutional recognition in Portugal, as it was approved by the Scientific Board of the Escola Superior de Educação.

The project started late in the semester because the Portuguese teachers’ original partner dropped out of the project at the last minute but she was able to find a new class for the exchange, and despite starting late in the semester, and the fact that in Brazil holidays started from the middle of the exchange, the project was considered by the teacher trainers involved to have been extremely successful.

The Portuguese teacher had no experience of virtual exchange but she had attended the EVALUATE workshop in Padova and collaborated in some of the mentoring meetings of other exchanges that other teachers at her university were involved in. Her institution was very supportive and had a small team of teachers working on virtual exchange. The Brazilian class had three teachers involved, and despite joining the project late, they managed to set up a good collaboration with their Portuguese partner. The teachers collaborated intensely during the exchange. They reported having weekly Skype meetings to discuss activities students were doing, and shared Google Docs and also said they were in touch almost daily on WhatsApp or Facebook. They also integrated the exchange into class activities and dedicated class time every week to discuss how the exchange was going – as their EVALUATE mentor had strongly advised.

Despite the potential challenges that this partnership posed (i.e. its late start, the geographic distance and hence also time difference between the classes, and its timing during the holidays), through their intense collaboration, the teachers managed to make this project a success.

The data from the diaries tell us that the majority of respondents reported coming from a homogeneous environment, as the following quote shows: “Very restricted. I had little contact
with people from other cultures, that’s why I found it difficult to reply to some questions due to my lack of knowledge concerning dialogue and exchanges with people from different cultures”.

However, they wanted to make the most of the virtual exchange experience to acquire new knowledge and perspectives on education aiming to implement them in their own contexts. In response to the question regarding their expectations, students responded:

“Know new technologies to use in the classroom, interact with other people and know about their cultures. Contribute to my professional training, as well as to that of the colleagues”.

“I would like to learn other strands of education in order to have other working methods, as well as explore other ways of learning, bringing benefits to people with special needs”.

“Understand and compare how another country works, its rules and culture. By making comparisons with Portugal to make conclusions about how we could improve our own country/work. Exchange ideas and learn new knowledge”.

6.1.2. How the virtual exchange was run

The Moodle platform was used to coordinate the exchange and for students to upload their work, but the students were also encouraged to use other forms of communication to interact with their peers during the exchange. Students were also required to do a collaborative writing task using a wiki.

The exchange was on the specific theme of inclusion entitled *Políticas Públicas de Inclusão em Portugal e no Brasil – semelhanças e diferenças* (Public Policies of Inclusion in Portugal and Brazil – similarities and differences) and the teachers adapted the EVALUATE task sequence to promote student reflection about the specific content they were addressing.

Considerable time was dedicated at the outset of the project on getting to know one another as the teachers felt it was important for the students to get to know one another well. Students made individual video or photo introductions for one another which they posted on Moodle, and they were required to comment on those of their international peers. They also had a class-to-class Skype video conference at the beginning of the exchange.
The theme of the exchange was inclusion of children with disabilities in public schools, and both countries have specific policies on this. These policies were explored in the second task. The groups analysed how inclusion in the two countries is structured, focussing on various comparable aspects. The groups had to search for texts, photos, facts, and interviews that illustrated and enriched their presentations. For their final task, they had to collaboratively prepare a presentation.

Both classes also reflected on the telecollaborative experience, focussing on what they learned from the experience regarding the use of technology and virtual exchanges in the development of their professionalism, and also on their intercultural development. The exchange could thus be said to have implemented principles of ‘reflective, experiential learning’ (Kolb, 2015), with the guided reflections supporting the student learning during the process of the exchange. Teachers regularly used class time to discuss the exchange with the students, and also asked them to reflect on the process.

6.1.3. Learning outcomes

The statistical results were very positive in terms of change in technical knowledge and intercultural effectiveness, for which there was the highest gain of all the EVALUATE partnerships. This does not mean that they were the most interculturally effective on the scale, but that they had made the most progress in comparison with the other groups. In fact, the respondents’ scores on the intercultural effectiveness scale were below average both before and after the exchange.

As reported earlier, the majority of students came from somewhat homogeneous backgrounds and had had few international and intercultural experiences. For them, unlike most of the other exchanges in the EVALUATE project which involved communication in a second language (usually English), these students were communicating in their first language, Portuguese. This may have lowered the barriers towards interacting with their peers and also allowed them to engage more deeply in the interactions about the issues they were studying, which require quite a high level of language competence to address in depth.

The student responses to the journal entries and the teacher interviews confirmed the positive learning outcomes of the project in cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural terms. The students were very interested in the theme which they learnt more about both in their own contexts as well as in their partners’. Hence, they perceived an increase in knowledge about the topic of diversity and inclusion:
“The investigation into accessibility allowed me to deepen my knowledge in its themes and in addition it is directly related to the wiki tool/online work. Overall, I valued the opportunity which I was given to reflect on the questions raised while working”.

“We explored the thematic of diversity, when I realised that this topic covers endless issues: cultural, social, ethnical, linguistic, humane, religious, among others. One important point is the relationship between inclusion and diversity, because in schools, since the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) many children and adolescents entered school with the most diversified needs and is a teacher’s duty the management as a whole in order to work with these differences. Regarding the similarities between the two countries, we reached an agreement that in order to live in a plural society be it in regards to the ethnic, cultural, intellectual and/or physical differences, there is a need to respect different groups and cultures that there are within a country”.

For the majority of the students, the main lesson learned was the possibility of doing collective writing and the online exchange of cultural experiences which for many was challenging, but also proved rewarding:

“The collaborative text was the most remarkable experience due to its joint production, which included our opinions and experiences which complemented each other”.
“It was a pedagogical challenge which allowed for different ways of learning about different places (without being physically present in the place). Skype is an interesting tool for distance learning”.

Use of class-to-class video conferencing, both at the beginning and at the end of the project, was also an important factor to community and relationship building, as reported by several of the students:

“On the first assignment, we used images and a video in order to communicate with each other, in addition to Skype which brought the groups closer together. I've learnt that sometimes we restrict ourselves to the resources we use in our daily lives, as for example, I had never communicated via Skype before, nor introduced myself through video. The Moodle platform also allows for this type of approximation and communication, and is an easy and user-friendly tool”.

At the end of the exchange, students reflected on what they have learned about the ways in which technology might influence their teaching approach and stressed the importance of using class video conferencing and tools that foster teamwork:

“Regarding technology, I can see that the use of videos and video conferencing can capture people’s attention and foster dialogue, so I would use it in class. The presentation of videos as a strategy for discussion and dialogue with people who are studying or working on the same topic”.

Though they did not give explicit examples, the students reported becoming aware of different perspectives on the same topic, and some saw this beyond purely cultural terms, but also highlighted the relevance of social and economic factors. In terms of intercultural awareness, this opening to different perspectives and recognition of diversity within their own societies marks an important step away from ethnocentrism:

“I think it is very good because we could combine different conceptions about the same object. So it opened up spaces for different ways of exploring the same content, for instance”.

“It is good to see a topic being explored by a great variety of viewpoints. Different viewpoints consolidate the general opinion about the object of study”.
“The cultural barriers only exist if that would be our choice. In every country, knowledge is constructed through the same orientations, what differentiates are the social, economic and cultural particularities”.

For one of the students it opened them up to the idea of going abroad, which they had not considered before:

“It’s the first time that I do something with foreign partners and this contributed in a significative way to my personal and professional journey/career. Today I feel more comfortable in sharing my knowledge and also my own doubts with my Portuguese colleagues. In addition, I believe that this opens up the doors, as I start wondering about going to Portugal and have the opportunity to learn more with the colleagues/professors from there”.

The Portuguese teacher also reported on the students’ and teachers’ desire to carry out a study visit after this exchange:

“The exchange was carried out with a country (Brazil) where it is not possible to set up Erasmus exchange, but the Brazilian group is now with intention to try to carry out a ‘study visit’ to Castelo Branco next year. Teachers are also considering joint projects around this theme”.

She also highlights the importance of virtual exchanges for students who are not mobile, and as mentioned in the introduction to this report, for a series of reasons, many students of education are not:

“For these students, who are almost all from blue-collar families, it is not possible to go on an Erasmus exchange, so these virtual exchanges are of extreme importance because it affords them contact with other cultural realities that are very different from their country, which otherwise would be impossible”.

From the teachers’ perspective, the EVALUATE project contributed to the exchange of knowledge concerning the thematic contents addressed, the technologies used, as well as the acquisition of intercultural competences as students had the opportunity to get to know new realities and cultures. They expressed a strong interest in continuing their experience of virtual exchanges despite the additional workload it placed on them.
6.2. A German-Polish exchange on the theme of digital-pedagogical competence

6.2.1. Classes involved

In this case study we focus on an exchange between 11 student teachers from a master course in a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teacher training programme at a Polish university, and eight students of a similar master TESOL at a German university. The group consisted of 16 female and three male student teachers aged from 20 to 24. All student teachers had extensive pedagogical preparation, with most of them having done teaching practices. They were a highly disparate group in terms of intercultural communicative competence, language proficiency, and digital competence, which impacted their communication, task perception, and pedagogical knowledge in terms of task design.

The virtual exchange took place during the 13-week winter term of the academic year 2017-2018. The participants worked in intercultural teams throughout the entire period. Weekly 1.5 hour meetings in the local classrooms were spent as follows: (1) 45 minutes in local teams for reflection on the ongoing exchange and the learning experience and (2) 45 minutes spent online in the intercultural teams working on tasks. The participants used English as a lingua franca.

6.2.2. How the exchange was run

The design of the virtual exchange followed a task sequence which is based on the progressive exchange model (O’Dowd & Ware, 2009) covering the three phases of information exchange, comparing, and analysing cultural practices, and working on a collaborative product. In their international groups, student teachers focussed on the collaborative design and peer evaluation of intercultural online-based and technology-supported tasks for their future English as a foreign language learners in primary and secondary schools. Following the experiential learning model (Hoven, 2006), student teachers experimented with various tools to get a feeling for their methodological use before they started the collaborative task design in Phases 2 and 3.

During the information exchange, or getting-to-know-each-other phase, they posted a short multimodal introduction in a Padlet (virtual wall) so that all participants could be seen in one single space and to create a group feeling. Introductions were also posted in the moodle group forum. In their international groups, student teachers communicated synchronously via the video-conferencing tool Zoom, discovering its potential for direct oral negotiation while deciding
on a group name such as ‘The Detective Eyes’. In this particular case, all team members liked
British crime novels and the British accent. For their written communication, the participants
used Google Docs which allowed them to jointly draft a group philosophy based on their chosen
name while discussing specifics in the comments which can be inserted into Google Docs.

In the second task phase, the international teams analysed an online task facilitating
intercultural learning, developed by student teachers in another virtual exchange, discussing
the use of technology in the task, and making suggestions for improving task design and
technology use. The analyses provided the backdrop for the teams’ own task designs for
technology-mediated intercultural learning, thus fostering their competence development.
Next, the international teams gave each other feedback on their respective tasks: both the
design and the peer feedback was then presented in the local classrooms, thus allowing for
comprehensive reflection on the task design process and its outcomes.

This process was repeated in the third phase – technology-based task design – peer-feedback,
local presentation, and reflection. However, this time, a more complex technology-based task
sequence was designed accompanied by a website (using Weebly) to display the finished task
sequence. Apart from using Weebly, teams were required to integrate at least three digital
tools into their task sequence. The intensive collaboration allowed student teachers to develop
different aspects of TPACK to varying levels.

6.2.3. Learning outcomes

Student teachers’ positive results in terms of digital-pedagogical competence development as
reflected in the quantitative data are corroborated by the qualitative data: diary entries, task
products, and transcripts of joint reflection and classroom discussions that took place throughout
the virtual exchange in both local contexts. Several themes emerged from the qualitative data. In
what follows, we highlight instances that are indicative for competence development.

It transpires from the student teachers’ diary entries that – before taking part in the virtual
exchange – there was uncertainty, reluctance, and a lack of knowledge with regards to online
tools and applications and their classroom integration:

“I was not too optimistic about using online tools in class (like Weebly, Zoom, learning
apps...), because I didn’t quite know how to incorporate those kinds of things in class. Now
I am sure that I am going to use them in class”.

“[...]hanks to this project I realised how important is the use of technology in a teacher’s job. I found out information about many new tools and how to use them, in what purpose. I think this knowledge will be useful for me in the future”.

Curricular expectations to work with online tools and applications in the classroom often generate high levels of anxiety among student teachers. It is therefore paramount to alleviate such anxieties by developing TPACK competences through virtual exchange. The fact that the participants reflected on these expectations at the very end of the virtual exchange confirms the need for such competence development in initial teacher education. In their final class discussion, student teachers brainstormed aspects they found helpful, interesting, challenging, or surprising in terms of digital-pedagogical, intercultural and foreign language competence developed during the virtual exchange. They then chose one critical incident which they had to draw (writing was not allowed) into the magnifying glass (see Figure 31). All magnifying glasses were put on the board in the local face-to-face classroom and student teachers could choose one drawing (not their own) and describe and interpret what they thought the drawing represented in terms of lived experiences during the virtual exchange. Finally the interpretations were discussed including feedback from the authors of the drawings.

In the example below, a student teacher had brainstormed the following points under digital-pedagogical competence:
• finding ways to incorporate technology in class;

• giving instructions (thinking of instructions to give students); and

• learning new online tools ourselves (and using them) (e.g. communication through Zoom, Google Docs, Padlet etc.).

While drawing her incident into the magnifying glass, she focussed on the challenge of incorporating technology in her future professional life as a classroom teacher.

In the interpretation of this drawing, the group first thought it was a university classroom. However, the following exchange ensued:

**Instructor**: Do the others agree, university context?

**Student 1**: No, I don’t think so. Because so many students. I think it’s school, but maybe it’s about the technical skills. The teacher wants something from the students about the technical things and they just don’t know how to do it.

**Instructor**: Who did this? You did this? Tell us.

**Student 2**: This was a much better idea [pointing to student 1, laughter]. I don’t really know what I was thinking when I drew it, but I thought of all the preparation we had to do, especially with Weebly, with all the instructions we had to think of, not only the task instructions, but also how to use the technology, that this situation [points to the drawing] doesn’t happen.

**Instructor**: Ah okay, so school classroom.

**Student 2**: Yes, because we had to think about it when we did the Weebly, how our students would do it. So that is the picture.

**Instructor**: So you see yourself here?

**Student 2**: Totally.

**Instructor**: As the future teacher, in front of your 20 eighth graders.

**Student 2**: I was not so creative today...

**Instructor**: No, that’s great. It’s important because you projected it into the future. Did you have the feeling with the Weebly that you covered the situation?

**Student 2**: Yes.

**Instructor**: So you feel confident about it?

**Student 2**: Yes.
In sum: while carrying out the task of creating a Weebly page – which is a challenge for her – this student teacher considers what engaging her future students in a similar task might look like. However, having experienced the process during the virtual exchange, she now feels confident about dealing with such challenges in her future classroom.

Apart from gaining confidence in using online tools in their future classrooms, Exchange 1 participants also developed an understanding of the pedagogical potential of some of the tools, such as Padlet for example:

“I especially liked Padlet. I think it is great for open discussions or the presentation of results”.

Diary entries also underline the potential for authenticity which they associate with using technology in the classroom:

“It offers the opportunity to stage real-life encounters inside the classroom where students are supposed to use the [foreign language] under real-life conditions in an authentic situation (when using Zoom, for example)”.

Broadly speaking, Exchange 1 diary entries referenced as ‘Projected benefit of technology use (self)’ fall into two categories: projected benefit of using specific tools versus projected benefit of using technology in general. As for the latter, an increase in confidence and inspiration as to how technology can be integrated into the classroom stands out:

“I have now more ideas how to apply online tools in the lesson”.

At the same time, some student teachers mention that they have become more careful with regards to technology use, which is probably due to their heightened level of awareness of tool affordances:

“I have been provided with many interesting online tools that will help me attract learners’ attention to the lesson and make the process of learning more pleasurable. Also, I have become more cautious about the choice of online technologies”.

A closer look at Exchange 1 diary entries for ‘Projected benefit of technology use (students)’ reveals that comments related to the motivational benefit of technology use for students are
frequent. The potential for enhanced learner independence is also mentioned, as is the advantage of authentic interaction with other learners from around the globe:

“If the teachers use e.g. controlled platforms, the students can do research all by themselves, individual or in teams, in order to do a task”.

“Using technology in class offers a unique opportunity to have meaningful and especially authentic conversations with people from another part of the world”.

Existing student familiarity with technology for communication and interaction in general and associated ease in terms of technology use for more formal educational purposes, also feature among student teachers’ reflections under this theme. However, we know from the literature that this is not necessarily the case. Already a decade ago, Selvyn (2009), for example, highlighted learners’ – especially young learners’ – deficiencies in this respect: an inability to transfer digital skills acquired in informal contexts to formal ones. A lack of critical or evaluative skills among young learners (Sharpe, 2010) has also been brought to our attention, as well as the difficulties learners experience with taking a critical stance towards online content in learning contexts that include opinion-generating activities (Littlejohn, Beetham, & McGill, 2013) in particular, unless, of course, they have experienced relevant practices. As EVALUATE has demonstrated, virtual exchange embedded into the curriculum and implemented by those who have experienced it as part of their initial teacher education (‘experiential modeling’), offers relevant practices in this respect.

Some reflections from Exchange 1 sit at the interface between ‘Projected benefit of technology use (students)’ and ‘Methodological use of tools’, those that include both direct and indirect considerations of tool affordances in particular, e.g.:

“the way how learners can present their work. Sometimes it’s easier and better for them to present short text or photo on the Padlet Wall, but when their ‘product’ is more complex it’s better to use presentation (e.g. Power Point)”.

Student teachers developed a good feel for the potential or projected benefit of specific tools, also in terms of the interrelationship between tool use and intercultural sensitivity. For example, they reflected on critical incidents from an American-German virtual exchange of two 10th grade classrooms, to foster the transfer of competences developed in the context of EVALUATE to their future classrooms. In the 10th grade virtual exchange, the American students had tried to
explain Thanksgiving to their German partners. However, not only were there great differences among the individual explanations, some were also outright incorrect. Asked how they would deal with such diverse answers in a face-saving way, one of the EVALUATE student teachers suggested the following:

“They could just post it [the American explanations] on the Padlet, so that those who wrote these statements, could see by themselves that it is different, and then they could start communicating about it. I think that’s better than if I just tell them that you are wrong”.

Seeing their (anonymous) explanations on Padlet, the American partners will realise that they need to look at their explanations of Thanksgiving again, and negotiate cultural representation among themselves and then communicate this to their German partners.

The student teacher was able to suggest this face-saving way of using Padlet because she had experienced a similar use of Padlet in her virtual exchange. Participants had been asked a few weeks into the exchange to anonymously post what bothered them most in the virtual exchange. They were also asked to make suggestions for solving problems posted by other student teachers, thus promoting an open exchange about contentious issues that had arisen: workload distribution, missing forum posts, perceived lack of interest, etc.

In her reflections, this student teacher uses the competence she has developed as a forward organiser for her future school classroom.
Most references for ‘Methodological use of tools’ are instances where student teachers – after mentioning a bespoke tool or application used in their virtual exchange – comment on the affordances of the tool or application and/or expand on their tool preference by providing a rationale:

“Especially Padlet is a really good tool that I would like to use in the future as well: it makes it very easy to collect students’ opinions and to make them start a conversation”.

“Using Google Docs is a great tool! I REALLY like it. It makes it so much easier for students to talk about a task and to work on it together. Whenever you cannot talk to each other via video chat or talk, Google Docs saves you. Everyone can write down his/her ideas at the same time. Thanks to the chat [commenting function] which you can use discussing about all the ideas straight away is really easy. If you use Google Docs, the times of writing a text, sending it to everyone else, waiting until they have read everything and worked on the text as well, are over! Exchanging ideas and working on tasks together even though you are not in the same place has never been that easy for me”.

This also echoed in this student teacher’s classroom reflection as the following extract of the transcript shows:

“When I tried it for the first time it was actually really confusing. But actually, this is a great tool to use whenever you have to cooperate and work on something together”.

This observation is mirrored in student teachers’ exchanges in their virtual exchange groups discussing this tool when evaluating another virtual exchange team’s use of technology in their task design (task phases 2 and 3). The evaluating team becomes aware of the missed opportunity for communication among international partners, pointing out that Padlet may also afford exchanges about task products, thus allowing for further commenting and negotiation.

**Student 1**: At the end of Phase 2 there is an idea that they put their suggestions on the Padlet wall and that’s ok. But then, at the beginning of Phase 3 students are asked to present their findings, and I think that it’s not necessary because they can just read their partners’ suggestions on Padlet. Maybe they should read it and comment instead of repeating their thoughts.

**Student 2**: I agree, it’s unnecessary
Student 3: Yes I agree!
Student 2: Perfect!
Student 3: Oh yes you are right! We could praise the idea of the Padlet as a new tool...
Student 1: Yeah

In another instance of providing feedback, a team suggests improvements of using specific tools in the classroom, pointing out their affordances and challenges:

“Storybird is a cool method, but you can’t include your ‘own’ pictures, just the ones that are provided on Storybird and it takes a while to understand the platform”.

“Good to introduce them to new options like Storybird, just takes time to create one. Maybe PowerPoint or Piktochart would be easier and they could add photos”.

Methodological use of tools and finding out how to prepare learners for informed tool use is a crucial aspect of digital-pedagogical competence. In the following example, the student teacher provides very positive feedback on a complex task sequence designed by another virtual exchange team. She points out that the task sequence is well designed in terms of preparing students for what she perceives to be a challenging session in Zoom:

“I really liked your lesson. I found that there was a really sequencing task and one task build up on the other. And I felt like that if I was a student, I could imagine that they can actually follow the procedure very well. You started to work with questions in the beginning and you used these questions later on in the while and post-task. I thought that students will be well prepared at the point when they get to Zoom with their partners. And they won’t have a problem to actually communicate with their partners. Because they have ideas in mind about questions. And I found that very important because it would be bad, I think when they Zoom and they didn’t know what to talk about and what to ask about”.

She also highlights the importance of sufficient support for students expected to use a new tool, by sharing a link to an online tutorial, for example, or by having the teacher model its use for the students. In this way she shows her appreciation for a pedagogical informed approach when dealing with technology.

“What I liked a lot, was your support for the teacher, for the About me page. First of all, you gave them the link of the About me page,... And also, the teacher presents his or her
own About me page. So, I liked this because it can serve as a model for the students. And you, as far as I remember, you said that students will get personal support when they create their own About me. I found that good”.

All these examples speak to the student teachers’ development of technological pedagogical knowledge through virtual exchange. Overall, the comments from this exchange speak to the fact that systematic training combining technology and pedagogy such as the virtual exchanges offered in the context of the EVALUATE project, remains a desideratum.

6.3. A Spanish-Swedish exchange on the theme of primary school education

6.3.1. Classes involved

This is a case study of an exchange between Spanish and Swedish students. Both groups were studying to become primary school teachers, which means that the EVALUATE task they completed was Primary connections: a telecollaborative exchange for future primary school teachers. Quantitative data places the group of learners studied here in 13th position (out of 25) for the learning gains they reported making in digital-pedagogical competence, in 15th position (again out of 25) for their learning gains in intercultural communicative competence, and in seventh position for their learning gains in foreign language competence. Averaged across the three competences, it is clear that these scores make them a representative, rather than an outstanding group, with an above average performance in terms of foreign language development. This makes them ideal for this particular case study, where predominant focus will be on what participants reported having learned in relation to foreign language competence. The data sources, which offer a basis for the case study, are five post-exchange interviews conducted with small groups of between two to four students of Spanish participants, plus two post-exchange oral presentations delivered by similar groups of Swedish participants, in which they reflected specifically on what they felt they had learned (or not) in the course of the exchange.

The classes involved in this exchange were large. The Spanish group consisted of 44 second year students; the Swedish group was 25 strong. The teachers who organised the exchange had varying degrees of expertise. The teacher of the Spanish group was a seasoned telecollaborator with more than two decades of experience of organising virtual exchanges. His Swedish counterpart was relatively new to virtual exchange. In the circumstances, they performed remarkably well.
6.3.2. How the exchange was run

Both groups participated in the exchange as part of an existing classroom-based programme. In the case of the Spanish participants, this was an obligatory module in English as a Foreign Language and Teaching Methodology. The course as a whole was worth six European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits, while participation in the exchange was worth 2.5 ECTS credits. Some Spanish participants expressed disquiet that the amount of credits awarded to their Swedish counterparts was higher than that which they received. In fact, for the latter, the exchange was worth 7.5 ECTS, but the award of these was conditional on their also passing the examinations in the course. When interviewed, the Spanish students made a telling plea for parity of treatment for both groups of participants: “[w]e could say that it is good if we all have to do the same. I mean,... it has the same importance for everyone”. Ideally, one assumes, this would apply not only to credit rating, but also to synchronising – as far as possible – the imparting of information and instructions to both groups. This speaks to a particular dilemma for organisers and facilitators of virtual exchanges. The diversity of institutional structures is inevitable and discovering and understanding other institutional microcultures is arguably a key outcome of virtual exchanges. But the fact that they exist and the incomprehension to which they can give rise is a challenge that requires awareness and negotiation.

As indicated above, the overall task engaged in by participants was designed for primary school teachers. In common with the other two tasks, this comprised three successive types of activity, involving: (1) information exchange, (2) comparing and analysing cultural practices, and (3) a collaborative product (e.g. a joint lesson plan).

Though there is a strong pedagogic rationale for this succession of activity types, both Spanish and Swedish students found it challenging to fit all three into the six-week period they had for the exchange. In fact ‘time’ was the topic which recurred most frequently in both interviews and presentations. A Spanish interviewee urged organisers of future exchanges “to give students more time to do the tasks, and maybe those that are different, that are more difficult, like, for example, the last task – more time”. The suggestion made by her Swedish counterpart is different, but motivated by the same sense that participants were pressed for time:

“We think that the tasks should maybe be shorter and more focussed, because there is a time aspect of working with this telecollaboration that shouldn’t be underestimated, because connecting to other schools, it’s time-consuming. And the projects, if they’re shorter and
more focussed, there’d be a greater possibility of actually finishing something... Maybe if we were given Task 3 in the beginning, we feel, and just forget about learning to know each other? We can do that as we go along”.

The technologies used by students included a dedicated Moodle virtual learning environment, Google Docs, and WhatsApp. Interviewed after the exchange, two Spanish participants described WhatsApp as “a useful app to keep in touch”. In particular, they identified “the immediacy that it offers” as a major benefit and compared this favourably to the Moodle virtual learning environment, “because people forget to enter the Moodle”. Their approval of WhatsApp did not, however, prevent them from showing a critical awareness of its possible drawbacks as a learning environment, namely the inability to ensure a balanced level of contribution from participants: “[t]he disadvantage in WhatsApp is like, sometimes people write too much and if you have a group, it can be annoying. But the advantage is that you reach the people really fast”. Another participant expressed unease on the grounds that the context in which she normally used WhatsApp was personal and informal: “[w]hen you're with your phone you use WhatsApp to entertain, to talk to my friends. Not like a thing to learn. It's like a thing I cannot match with education”.

While WhatsApp use may not therefore have been entirely unproblematic, what emerged most clearly from participants’ comments on technologies was the limited usefulness of a standard learning management tool, such as a Moodle virtual learning environment, in a situation where time was of the essence. A Spanish participant made this point with particular clarity:

“In my personal opinion, Moodle is not the best way to carry on all the work, because we never know when somebody is uploading something, or is making a comment. We don’t know when to reply. So it's better to have a WhatsApp group, or at least Google Docs, to work, everybody together, so that we can have comments and they get sent to our emails, so we know how the work is progressing”.

6.3.3. Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes listed by participants are varied. They fall into three broad areas: organisational and time management skills, open-mindedness and empathy, and, finally, politeness and precision in language use.

Virtually all interviewees mentioned the need to be organised and to manage one’s time. When asked what she had learned, one Spanish participant responded simply “we learned
that organisation is really important”. Another classmate concurred, affirming that “[t]o have organisation is essential. And to start the task as soon as possible”. These are, of course, transferable skills, the possession of which makes a graduate highly employable.

In terms of personal attributes and attitudes, participants stressed that open-mindedness was both a requisite for successful participation in virtual exchanges as well as a likely outcome of that participation. The former view was expressed with admirable maturity by a Spanish participant:

“If somebody has an idea and another person from another country has the complete opposite idea, they have to give in to each other a little bit..., so that they can work together for the project. Otherwise, if you're fixed in your idea and not open-minded, there's nothing to do, because you won't be satisfied with your work either way”.

That view was echoed by her Swedish counterpart, who saw her and her classmates’ own increased openness to innovative, technologically-based pedagogy as a key gain from their participation in an online exchange:

“After taking part in this telecollaboration project, we feel that we have learned more about technology that can be gained out of students across the world and we believe that we would most likely be more open to using telecollaboration in future”.

Other participants went even further than advocating mere openness and stressed the need to be able to put oneself in a partner’s shoes:

“I would say, try to put yourself into the other person's shoes. Try to understand where they are coming from. I think that's important also, because sometimes we tend to focus too much on our culture and what we know and we forget that they come from a different culture, they have maybe different values from us. And that's not negative or positive, it's something you have to keep in mind, I think”.

Effectively, what is being advocated here is a capacity for empathy, which is both a personal attribute and an interpersonal and intercultural competence. The hallmark of any fully-rounded human being, it is also an indispensable employability skill for the global workplace, where multicultural teamwork is now the norm.
One of the features of this exchange was that it was exclusively textual. This brings particular challenges, since text on its own is a relatively restricted medium, lacking all the non-verbal cues which ease oral-aural communication, even when mediated by videoconferencing. The difficulty of communication purely by text was clearly recognised by participants. A Spanish interviewee noted: “I think that all the interactions were written, which was not very good”.

Accordingly, the exchange was the scene of at least one critical incident, which occurred in a discussion of LGBTQ questions. A Spanish participant asked if it was possible for members of the LGBTQ community to display affection publicly for each other in public places, on the grounds that, in some parts of Spanish cities, this might expose gay couples to homophobic attacks. His question was clumsily expressed, in that he wrote of LGBTQ people “hiding who they really are”. This evoked an extremely hostile response from two Swedish interlocutors, whereupon he apologised and offered an explanation of his question. In reply, a Swedish participant expressed the view that “this is an example of an intercultural discussion” and expressed a readiness to engage in further “intercultural communication exchange”. To this observer, it is not clear that there was a significant difference in the views on sexual orientation held by the two groups. The incident appears much more likely to have been an example of miscommunication, rather than cultural dissonance. What it illustrates, however, is how fundamental the role played by language (and by the need for linguistic precision) is in virtual exchanges.

The need for politeness and precision was something that participants themselves clearly understood. Spanish participants stressed both the importance of providing feedback to one’s partners and the need to ensure that, in doing so, one did not give offence: “I had to take special care when I said things. I looked to be sure that I was being polite. and that [no] one could get offended by me”.

Swedish partners in this exchange were equally aware of the requirement to adjust their use of the foreign language to the communicative context. As one of them put it: “[t]he students from Spain were not maybe at the same level as us, I don’t know, but that’s a part of it, adjusting our language to making them understand, so there can be a dialogue, and I think we had a really great dialogue with them”.

If greater pragmatic control was one aspect of foreign language competence development undergone by participants, so too were attempts to ensure the greater linguistic precision which contributes to such control. Here, there is abundant evidence that Spanish participants were just
as linguistically aware as their Swedish partners. As one of them expressed it: “[y]ou have to revise what you're going to send, because we're very used to oral communication and it's not the same. And also try to be as polite as possible”. This was far from an individual insight. That is clear from the responses of some of her fellow interviewees. Asked what advice they would give to those taking part in similar exchanges, their responses are telling. One urges: “[p]lease, guys, be careful with the choice of communication” while her co-interviewee responds “[y]eah, be careful when you write... think twice”. There could be no better advice for anyone planning to communicate online.