



Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education

Theories, Concepts and Practical Approaches of Virtual, Blended and Physical Mobility



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This article presents the seminar concept "VIEW: Virtual Intercultural Exchange Worldwide" which was developed at Justus Liebig University in 2022 as part of the "GloPEG: Global Primary School Education Giessen" project. This seminar concept aims to support the development of intercultural competencies among teacher education students by offering virtual international seminars. These seminars are led by both a German and an international lecturer and integrate students from all over the world. The seminar is based on the flipped classroom model and provides opportunities for both formal and informal exchange. Its aim is to teach students how to deal with intercultural diversity not only on a theoretical basis but also through intensive intercultural exchange. This article introduces the seminar concept and presents practical experience, evaluation data, and 'lessons learned' from two different practical implementations in the summer term of 2023. The seminars were conducted in cooperation with colleagues from the University of Tallinn (Seminar 1) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Seminar 2).

Schlagworte: intercultural exchange; COIL; exchange; virtual exchange; internationalization; teacher education
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VIEW: Virtual Intercultural Exchange Worldwide – A Seminar Concept for Intercultural Learning in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This article presents the seminar concept “VIEW: Virtual Intercultural Exchange Worldwide” which was developed at Justus Liebig University in 2022 as part of the “GloPEG: Global Primary School Education Giessen” project. This seminar concept aims to support the development of intercultural competencies among teacher education students by offering virtual international seminars. These seminars are led by both a German and an international lecturer and integrate students from all over the world. The seminar is based on the flipped classroom model and provides opportunities for both formal and informal exchange. Its aim is to teach students how to deal with intercultural diversity not only on a theoretical basis but also through intensive intercultural exchange. This article introduces the seminar concept and presents practical experience, evaluation data, and ‘lessons learned’ from two different practical implementations in the summer term of 2023. The seminars were conducted in cooperation with colleagues from the University of Tallinn (Seminar 1) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Seminar 2).

Keywords: intercultural exchange, COIL, exchange, virtual exchange, internationalization, teacher education

Outline

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1 Introduction

The internationalization of teacher education and especially of elementary school teacher education is becoming increasingly important. Unfortunately, many students in teacher education are unable to engage in internalization efforts due to the low mo-

bility of student teachers, cost, local mandates and regulation in teacher preparation (DeCuir, 2017). As such, virtual forms of internationalization are becoming a popular alternative in teacher education (Brück-Hübner et al., 2024; Seifert, 2024, both in this anthology). This paper will present a seminar concept that was developed at Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU) in 2021 as part of the project “GLOPEG: Global Primary School Education Giessen” and is based on the internationalization strategy of teacher education at JLU (Kopp et al., 2024, in this anthology): “VIEW: Virtual Intercultural Exchange Worldwide”. In addition to a description of the seminar concept, two practical implementations of the concept are presented below. Lastly, this paper will also highlight reflections of our experiences as the creators and instructors, evaluation results, strengths and limitations and lessons learned.

2 The Seminar Concept

“VIEW” is a completely virtual, international seminar in English, which aims to prepare students to work and support diversity in classrooms by providing them with basic theoretical knowledge, pedagogy and application from a “didactic double-decker”. In other words, this seminar provides an experiential space that encourages and promotes both German students and international students (who are connecting from all over the world) to engage in intercultural exchange and acquire intercultural competencies, which will become an important competency in teaching preparation.

The basic idea of the seminar concept is based on the COIL concept (Cooperative Online International Learning, see e. g. SUNY Coil Center; Brück-Hübner, 2023, p. 8; Rubin & Guth, 2017). In this sense, the seminar is led by two lecturers: A lecturer from JLU and a lecturer from an international partner university. Both lecturers work collaboratively in all phases of organization, planning, implementation, student support, assessment, and evaluation.

The student group is composed of students from the home universities of the two lecturers. In addition, the seminar is also open to interested international students from other partner universities. It is important to note that at Justus Liebig University Giessen, the VIP program provides a good administrative infra- and support structure to engage in partnership and collaboration with partner universities (Kiesler et al., 2021).

Structurally, the seminar is composed of five main elements: (1) Asynchronous self-learning phases, (2) Synchronous seminar sessions, (3) Synchronous “Wrap-up” sessions, (4) Group work and group project and (5) Formative ePortfolio-work (see Figure 1). These components will be explained in the following passages.

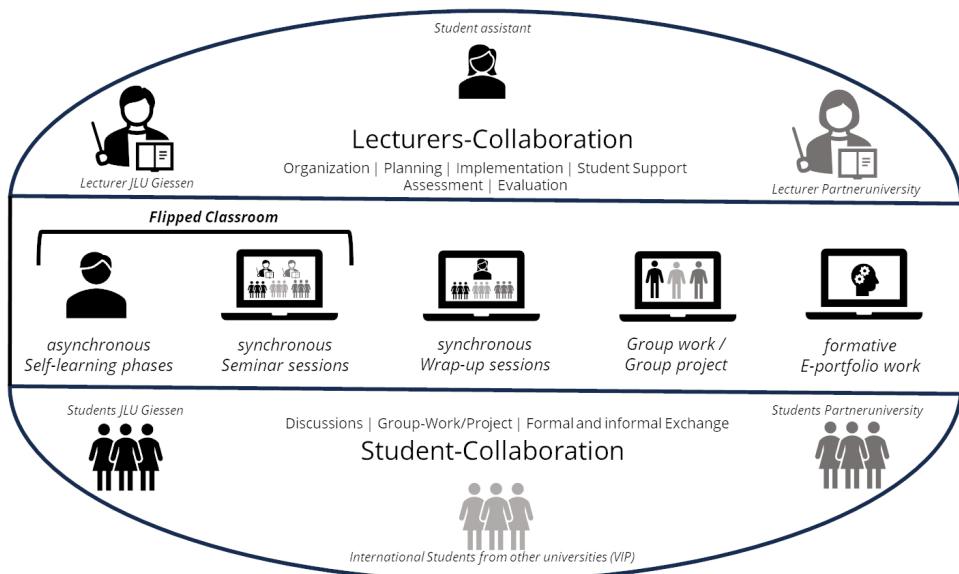


Figure 1: The VIEW-Concept

Since the aim of the seminar is to teach theoretical contents and to promote intercultural exchange and discussion, the seminar is structured using the "Flipped Classroom Model" (see e. g. Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018). This means that synchronous virtual seminar sessions are always prefaced by (1) asynchronous self-learning phases. For this, students receive concrete preparatory tasks and are provided with various learning materials (e. g. literature or videos) via the virtual learning environment "ILIAS". The content worked out by students then serves as the foundation for the (2) synchronous virtual seminar sessions, which are led by the instructors. The primary focus of the synchronous seminar sessions is to provide students the space for guided joint discussion and intercultural exchange related to the respective learning content and topic. In addition, students have the opportunity to ask for clarification, post open questions and lecturers can also provide short, in-depth content-related lectures.

A major disadvantage of virtual international courses is that informal exchanges usually come up short. In other words, the intercultural exchange is done once students log off from their course. This is different from a physical stay abroad, that provides students the opportunity to immerse themselves more intensively in another culture for an extended period of time. In addition, coming together in presence also provides repeated opportunities for students to exchange ideas informally and thus get to know each other better – whether in the form of small talk before and after seminar sessions, over lunch in the cafeteria, or during joint private excursions and experiences (Brück-Hübner, 2023, pp. 19–20). Such forms of exchange are difficult to implement virtually. Nevertheless, within the framework of our seminar concept, it was important for us to create spaces that enable students to engage in an informal exchange beyond the learning content for the purpose of improving the process of getting to know other

students and their cultures. For this reason, informal (3) Wrap-up sessions were also included in the seminar concept. These are not led by the lecturers, but by a student tutor. The Wrap-up sessions give students a variety of opportunities to exchange ideas about their lives and cultures and to get to know each other better. The Wrap-up sessions are at the core of our seminar concept.

Another important goal for students is to also improve competencies in intercultural communication. For this reason, they are divided into smaller, international groups at the beginning of the course and are given a common work assignment that they have to work on collaboratively. While we recognize that international virtual (4) group work is very challenging and can cause intercultural frictions and conflicts, we also know that this task helps to challenge students to learn and implement intercultural competencies to find a way to work together. Besides the synchronous and asynchronous responsibilities, students also complete a series of tasks to further promote the growth of intercultural competencies.

To promote the development of intercultural competencies and to initiate processes of professionalization, an individual reflection of the intercultural exchange processes is essential (Brück-Hübner, 2024, in this anthology). Students are therefore required to create a formative reflection (5) ePortfolio throughout the seminar timeframe. Following each seminar and Wrap-up session, students are given reflection assignments to complete and include in their ePortfolio.

3 “VIEW” in Practice

This basic theoretical concept was implemented in two different seminars during the summer semester of 2023 using the learning platform BigBlueButton (BBB) and the Learning Management Systems “ILIAS” and “STUD.IP”. In the process of planning and leading the seminars, slight modifications of the theoretical concept were made in both seminars.

3.1 Seminar I: “Virtual International Exchange: Transition and Inclusion in Global Educational Contexts”

3.1.1 The seminar design

Seminar 1 was led by Ulrike Beate Müller (JLU Giessen, Germany) and Maire Tuul (Tallinn University, Estonia). Ene Varik-Maasik (Tallinn University, Estonia) was an additional interlocutor for the Estonian students. The seminar was offered from April to June 2023. The content focused work was offered on Saturdays and the Wrap-up sessions on Wednesdays.

The seminar started with an opening session on 19th April to welcome all students. During this session, students were introduced to the lecturers and the student tutor. Also, students received an explanation of the course requirements. To provide students an opportunity to get to know each other, the strategy “speed dating” was used

in breakout sessions. Lastly, the lecturers gave a brief lecture on the topics of transition to school and inclusion.

This seminar included three days of intensive content work (6th May, 27th May and 10th June). Day 1 was meant as a basic day to exchange with students about basic issues of transition to school and inclusion. Day 2 focused on transition to school (led by Ulrike Beate Müller) and day 3 on inclusion (led by Maire Tuul). Based on the flipped-classroom concept, the students were asked to prepare material ahead of the three synchronous days. For day 1, the students had to prepare material for a first exchange about transition and inclusion. For day 2 and 3, the students had to prepare presentations in groups. As day 2 concentrated on transition, the group topics were “Multiple perspectives”, “Children’s perspective”, “Educators and teachers”, “Parents’ involvement” and “Successful transition”. Every group had to prepare one topic. The group topics of day 3 (inclusion) were: “Educational robotics”, “Telepresence robot”, “Teaching assistants”, “Teacher’s role in the inclusion”, “Teacher education”.

Both intensive days consisted of five topics. Each topic started with a short 10-minute group presentation followed by a short period of breakout discussion (7–8 minutes) with questions given by the specific group and a whole group discussion part in plenum afterwards (7–8 minutes). In the Wrap-up sessions all students had the opportunity to ask questions about organizational aspects and assessment. Phases for intercultural exchange in the Wrap-up sessions were organized addressing the topics of the seminar and informal communication.

In all synchronous sessions, there were group work phases of fixed groups to prepare the live presentations and phases of randomly organized group work. The class roster included 45 students (27 Germans, 14 Estonians, 4 internationals), so that 10 groups of about 4–5 students were created. For the ten fixed groups, the students were asked to enroll via StudIP at the beginning of the course. 2–3 German students per group were asked to enroll into the groups first, 1–2 Estonians afterwards and international students were asked to enroll last. Each group was assigned a certain day to enroll in a group (Germans on Friday, Estonians on Monday and internationals on Tuesday).

The assessment for this seminar consisted of the graded oral presentation and of an essay of 3–4 pages which was to be handed in at the end of the seminar. The presentations were graded in groups (criteria: content, structure, interaction, way of presenting) and the essays individually (criteria: relevant goal, discussion, argumentation, literature, structure, expression). Handing in the ePortfolio at the end of the course was obligatory as well but the ePortfolio was not graded.

In accordance with the opening session, a feedback session took place at the end of the course. This session was organized separately for Estonian and German students to provide students with the opportunity to use their primary language, which, it was hoped, would provide more direct and honest feedback. The international students were given the opportunity to provide feedback to the student tutor.

The same seminar was run in November and December 2023 again with different students.

3.1.2 Evaluation and Student Feedback

At the end of the seminar the students were asked to give feedback orally and in written form in an anonymous official course evaluation, in an online-survey and in the ePortfolio. In the following section, a summary of their responses is provided.

Atmosphere and exchange

The intercultural atmosphere and the intercultural exchange were aspects that were stated by many students as positive feedback. Exchange was described as open and culturally enriching. Many of the students highlighted the possibility of getting to know new and international people. In relation to students' nationality, one student shared that they would have liked to hear more about the experiences of students from different countries. Many students described the atmosphere created by the lecturers as being friendly, polite and supportive.

“Something else I really enjoyed about the seminar was hearing a lot of individual, personal stories and experiences from the other students and conversations.” (Student, ePortfolio, View I)

“To have the opportunity to communicate with students from other countries and get to know multiple different perspectives in these important topics. Also the many group discussions were really insightful.” (Student, course evaluation, View I)

“I liked the supportive space create(d) by the instructors, where I felt comfortable to share my opinions. I also liked hearing about the practices in different countries.” (Student, course evaluation, View I)

Technical realization

Especially at the beginning, some students from Estonia found the technical registration quite challenging because they had not anticipated having to create multiple accounts for course participation. However, once the necessary accounts were created and the initial acquaintance with the learning environments was established, the use of these learning platforms was perceived as straightforward rather than complicated.

Many students lacked prior experience in using the BigBlueButton conference platform, thus, for some, it took a little time to familiarize themselves with its capabilities during the initial stages of the course. Although the usage of BBB was learned relatively quickly, the digital system was frequently noted to be unstable and lacking technical reliability. Additionally, some students encountered microphone-related issues.

“It would be necessary to improve the technical connection for new students.” (Student, course evaluation, View I)

Group work and discussions

While exchanging and communicating with international students was mentioned as being a very positive element of the seminar, students shared ideas of how to improve group work and synchronous discussions. Some students criticized that others did not switch on their cameras. Other students shared that they repeatedly noticed students

who did not actively participate in breakout sessions. Students suggested that group work could be organized more often in “familiar” working groups and not in randomly built groups.

“Everything worked fine. We shared responsibilities, communicated with each other and everyone was cooperative.” (Student, Online-survey, View I)

“Maybe bigger groups in different rooms because (in) some group sessions only a few people were active.” (Student, course evaluation, View I)

Content work and presentations

Students shared that the topics included were seen as relevant and that presentations in day 2 and 3 were regarded as interesting. Some students stated that they would have preferred to have more time to discuss aspects in plenum and one shared that they would have been interested in more input by the lecturers.

“Not enough time for the presentations/discussions.” (Student, course evaluation, View I)

3.1.3 Reflection and “Lessons Learned” of the Lecturers

We lecturers continuously reflected and made notes in our personal e-Portfolio addressing own feelings, experiences, challenges and lessons learned. We commonly reflected about these impressions in a lecturers’ feedback talk with the two lecturers of the other View seminar and the student tutor after both courses had finished. In the following section, we highlight our reflections and lessons learned.

Atmosphere and exchange

We really liked the intercultural atmosphere. It was great to have our own intercultural exchanges as lecturers in preparations for the course and to have the intercultural exchange between lecturers and students during the course. In planning, collaborating and leading the seminar, we felt enriched by the other lecturers’ expertise and how they organized and taught their seminar session.

Technical realization

As stated by the students, BBB is not the best digital platform to house an international synchronous seminar. Our reality was that often people could not regularly get into the system and that sound or video functions did not work constantly for all students. We would have preferred to use another virtual platform such as Zoom. Zoom was not an option because the Zoom application for JLU staff did not provide breakout sessions or the option for students to register. Thus, we had to decide to use BBB instead.

Group work and discussions

Because we had many students enrolled in the seminar, we had to organize five groups for each intensive day. We recognize that this limited our active time for exchange on each topic. For the next time, we plan to have fewer students, especially fewer students from Germany. The enrollment into the groups via StudIP worked well for our semi-

nar. None of our students had problems with enrolling in a group. By enrolling themselves stepwise, the students were able to choose a topic and to choose other students as group mates to a certain extent. Like the students, we also noticed several students who did not switch on their camera. For next time, we want to be clearer at the beginning of the course and throughout the course about the expectation of keeping the camera on, especially in group work phases.

While Germans and Estonians remained in the course quite constantly, the drop-out rate of international students was quite high – only 40 % completed the course. This phenomenon is normal with our VIP seminars. In many of our VIP seminars, the drop out of international students is high. To combat that, we had hoped that having two lecturers from two different countries would help to lower the dropout rate. Thus, it was good to have a constant group of German and Estonian students because one of their lecturers was the main lecturer.

Additionally, it was good to have a student tutor. The student tutor supported informal exchange with the students, handled all the organizational aspects such as helping students to get into the systems of JLU, answered questions and led content-related informal exchange about the seminar topic. This provided an additional person to support the students.

Content work and presentations

Feedback from the students showed that they were interested in the topics and liked the way they were organized. Some students mentioned that they would have preferred to have less or less randomly organized group work. By giving the opportunity to work in groups frequently and randomly, we intended to give all students the chance to get to know and to talk to each other. For the next time, it is important for us to reflect on how to best use group work.

After the course had begun, we decided to change the structure of the intensive days. At intensive days 2 and 3, after each of the five presentations a breakout session and a plenum discussion was planned. Initially, discussions were meant to be led by the instructors but the oral participation of students at day 2 (transition) showed to be quite low. Thus, we decided that the groups who prepared the presentations for their topics had to lead the discussion part in plenum after the breakout sessions. We made this change of organization in day 3 and soon after that we noticed a higher degree of active participation of students.

Finally, we want to recognize the planning stage. A lot of hours of preparation in digital meetings were necessary for the lecturers to arrange all different aspects of the seminar: enrollment, systems used, methods and media, structure, material and tasks for content work etc. As the seminar is planned in a similar way in the following semester, we think that there will be less hours of common arrangement and planning necessary.

3.2 Seminar II: “Virtual International Exchange: Intercultural Communication and Inclusion in Global Educational Contexts”

3.2.1 The Seminar Design

The second VIEW Seminar with the title “Virtual International Exchange: Intercultural Communication and Inclusion in Global Education Contexts” was led by Annika Brück-Hübner (JLU Giessen, Germany) and Tatiana Joseph (UW-Milwaukee/Wisconsin, USA). This seminar was offered as an intensive course from May to July 2023. The content focused work was offered on Wednesdays and the Wrap-up sessions on Fridays.

The intensive seminar began with a kick-off event on 31st May, which was aimed at getting to know each other and clarifying organizational issues, and group formation. The four weekly synchronous seminar sessions were held from 21st June to 12th July.

As intended by the concept, we based our session design on the flipped-classroom model. The first seminar session (21st June) was held by Tatiana Joseph on “The Role of Intercultural Competencies in Education”. The students had to complete various preparatory tasks based on literature and video material, which were made available to them via our digital learning environment in ILIAS. The same applied to the second session, which was organized by Annika Brück-Hübner on the topic of “Intercultural Communication and Reflection” (28th June). In the sessions, our focus was clearly on intercultural exchange and discussion. The students were therefore repeatedly sent to break-out rooms in various constellations to work together on concrete tasks or to exchange ideas on discussion issues. The third session (5th July) focused on group work. In the last session (12th July), the topic of “inclusion” was discussed in greater depth. The focus here, however, was additionally on the joint discussion, reflection and evaluation of the seminar.

The group formation instructions were shared with students during the kick-off event. The students were asked to divide themselves into groups via the learning management platform Stud.IP. The lecturers gave the students a choice of different topics and the first task of the groups was to decide, independently and collaboratively, which topic they would like to work on. The students were then asked to discuss the topic from their individual cultural perspectives and create a joint video focusing on the differences and similarities of the different nations and cultures involved. One example was an analysis and comparison of textbooks from different countries in terms of the criterion “representation of diversity”. In addition, student groups designed a 30-minute “interactive lesson” that built on the video and engaged their peers and encouraged collaborative discussion and reflection. In preparation for the third seminar session, students were asked to watch the other groups’ videos and make video reflections on them. Accordingly, the implementation of the “interactive sessions” took place in the synchronous third seminar session. Here, too, the concept of the “flipped classroom” was stringently followed.

Between those synchronous seminar sessions there were also three weekly Wrap-up sessions led by a student tutor (23rd June, 30th June, 7th July). Here there were no guidelines from the lecturers, rather the student tutor was free to decide together with the students what they wanted to talk about. Despite its highly informal nature, attendance at the Wrap-up sessions was obligatory for the students.

At the end of the kick-off session, as well as each seminar and Wrap-up session, students were given reflection tasks to integrate into their ePortfolios. The ePortfolio also served as a documentation space for the assignments during the self-directed preparation phases.

3.2.2 Evaluation and Student Feedback

The evaluation of the seminar was conducted using an anonymous collection of feedback via an Edupad in the last seminar session, an online survey as well as through the ePortfolios of the students. Based on the evaluation and student feedback we can summarize the results as follows.

Atmosphere, exchange and learning success

The students enjoyed the seminar, especially the interactive design of the seminar sessions as well as the informal exchange during the Wrap-up sessions and reported that they learned a lot about others but at the same time also about their own culture. Students also shared that the seminar helped them to improve intercultural competencies as well as (intercultural) communication skills.

“There was definitely a lively exchange about similarities and differences, especially in the context of education. In addition, the wrap-up sessions allowed for an informal exchange on other topics, so that I was able to learn a lot about other countries and cultures. This also encouraged me to reflect on my own culture and to penetrate it even more. I have become more open to other cultures and have realized how important and useful intercultural exchange is in order to learn from each other. I now appreciate intercultural exchange all the more, as the seminar showed me how valuable it can be and that, despite some communication difficulties, you can benefit from it in any case, as it can broaden your own world view.” (Student, ePortfolio; VIEW II)

The students liked the very trustful and safe atmosphere of the sessions and the focus on collaborative learning – also from the side of the lecturers. Individual students also report that they use this approach as a model for themselves.

“This seminar taught me again how important it is as a teacher to be sensitive to all cultures in the classroom. In this seminar, too, people were always interested in the other cultures and there was a very respectful approach to the different cultures, and I would like to be able to create the same atmosphere in my classroom later on.” (Student, ePortfolio, VIEW II).

Overall, the feedback shows that the students enjoyed the virtual exchange. At the same time some of them requested to meet face-to-face at least for a few days, in one of the countries.

Groupwork, workload and time shift

The students felt that this is a very innovative seminar concept, that should be kept but – of course – also improved in some parts. They mainly criticized the very high workload resulting from group work, self-preparation-tasks and ePortfolio-reflections – especially in the very short time (six weeks) and at the end of the summer term for the German students (that includes final exams in other courses at the same time).

“I felt very stressed during the seminar because of the immense workload. It was really hard. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the intercultural exchange to compare different countries and I loved meeting people from other countries.” (Student, Edupad, VIEW II)

They also reported different challenges in group work, e.g. a high drop out from the international students from other international partner universities as well as challenges of reaching out to the international students (more support from lecturers is required in regards to time and knowledge of platforms) and working together collaboratively when living in different time zones.

“[...] The time difference made it hard to work on tasks together. If we were all in one country, we could do a video chat and work on the task simultaneously. In this group work we split the tasks and worked separately on them [...].” (Student, Online-Survey, VIEW II)

Because of the time difference, the seminar was scheduled in the early evening for German/European students. As such, the German/European students said that the time of the seminar was too late for them. They shared that it was hard to communicate in English and keep up with the very intensive exchange in the evening (it was from 5–7 p.m. German time, which was 9–12 a.m. for the students from UWM). The students also asked for more and shorter sessions.

“Overall I enjoyed it, however I would change the timing to maybe even just an hour earlier, as 5–8 p.m. is quite late to still be actively thinking and participating, especially for those who had uni/work during the day!” (Student, Edupad, VIEW II)

(Technical) Issues

International students shared that they had problems enrolling into our German learning environment systems.

“I felt great during the seminar! I was a little confused at times with the system and frustrated that things didn't always work in terms of making ILIAS work but new apps are a bit tough for me” (Student, Edupad, VIEW II).

The students criticized the process of group building via Stud.IP. For them, it took too much time to finalize groups – time they should have used for working on group tasks.

“I would have been better to coordinate the allocation of the groups, so that it doesn't take more than one week until everyone knows in which group he/she is.” (Student, Edupad, VIEW II)

3.2.3 Reflection and “Lessons Learned” from the Lecturers

As with Seminar 1, we lecturers also kept a portfolio of reflections parallel to our event and did a common discussion and reflection session after finishing the seminar. Our key conclusions are summarized below.

Organizational Issues and workload

During the joint planning, the main challenge was to find a suitable time period in which to offer the seminar. Our challenges came from the differences between the two universities in semester start/end dates, accommodating student internships and teaching roles and accommodating internships during the semester breaks of both countries. Unfortunately, the seminar could not be stretched over a semester as originally planned but had to be conducted as an intensive seminar. For us, six weeks is a very short time for the seminar concept. It would have been better to have weekly 2-hour sessions over a period of at least 10 weeks. For us it was hard to keep up with everything as well: The preparation, student support and feedback, assessment and all the other organizational tasks, and especially keeping up with attendance and ensuring that everyone was still “on board”.

Furthermore, we had too many elements for assessment: group-videos, interactive sessions, preparation tasks, reflective ePortfolios and attendance. We recognize that it would have been better to reduce that, even if it did not fit perfectly to the guidelines from our universities. It would have been better to request an exception for assessment from our home universities and to create more “assessment free spaces”.

Participation and Exchange

We needed to deal with some challenges related to students’ participation. Among the international students who participated via the VIP program, there were some who regularly arrived late or left early, left their cameras off and did not participate in the plenary session or in the breakout rooms. We should have taken much more stringent action earlier, but again, we struggled with capacity and time.

Especially at the beginning, we had problems with engaging students in the plenary. We used the think-pair-share method to give students time to prepare for the plenary discussions (1. Think about the question on your own and take notes; 2. Go into break-out-rooms and discuss the question with your partner; 3. Present your results in the plenary). But in the first two sessions we recognized that the students were really engaged in discussing the topics in the break-out rooms (“safe-spaces”) but hardly participated in plenary. We encouraged them several times and underlined the fact that it was acceptable if their command of the language was less than perfect and mistakes were made. It took them some time to come to terms with this. We recognized a lot more student participation in plenary discussions in the last two sessions. As such, it is important to recognize that language plays a huge role. It took some time for our students to be confident enough to speak. Also, in that point of view, a longer seminar time would have helped to get a better group feeling and enhance communication and discussion in plenary.

Differences in university cultures

Even if we have been aware of the fact that our students are socialized differently in relation to university work, we should have had a more open conversation and discussion about our expectations for group work in the first session. We prepared very detailed instructions about what the expectations of the product were but did not discuss how the different approaches in group work may affect the final product. While assessing students, we realized that some of the UW-Milwaukee students had been more focused on research while the German students wanted to do more practical related work. Still, there is some space for improvement of our advice before starting the group works.

Conclusion

Both of us enjoyed the virtual international exchange, and we also learned a lot about other cultures and extended our own intercultural communication and teaching skills as well. It was hard work as the investment of time needed to organize a seminar like this is not comparable with a “regular” seminar. The high amount of work, resulting out of the close collaborative planning and organization, was energy-sapping. Also the huge time shift of six hours gave us limited chances to meet and exchange (we did meet very early for US-time or very late for German time). The accommodation of these times often steeped into our family life and free time, which created additional stress for us. But overall, it was a great adventure, and we are willing to give it another try in another semester.

3.3 Reflection and “lessons learned” of the student tutor

Similar to all lecturers, I also kept a portfolio for reflections parallel to both VIEW seminars. Generally, I found attending both seminars gave me the opportunity to try out different ideas and adjust my planning after seminar 1 according to the experiences I had previously made and the feedback I received. My main conclusions are summarized below:

1. Especially at the beginning, it was difficult to engage students in group and plenary discussions. In the planning phase of seminar 1, we considered groups of 4–5 students to be optimal for breakout-discussions, as this would provide the opportunity to compose groups of students from both partner universities as well as international students. However, due to different group work effects and technical issues, the exchange remained rather limited, even though it did increase compared to the first session. For the second seminar, I switched to smaller groups of 2–3 students from different cultural backgrounds. This led to improved engagement in both the group and plenary discussions.
2. The discussion topics and guiding questions I agreed upon with the lecturers in order to create an informal exchange amongst our students were initially too restricting. Although the students exchanged ideas with each other, they overall did not yet engage in a process of reflection on cultural similarities and differences. This could be improved by formulating the guiding questions more openly while prompting reflection processes, so that their exchange became more meaningful.

3. The role of the student tutor did not become clear to a number of international students, as this concept is understood very differently in the various teaching backgrounds. We should have made it clearer from the beginning which person to contact for which problem in order to avoid confusion and extra work for all.

All in all, I really enjoyed the virtual international exchange with students and lecturers from all over the world. It was a great opportunity to learn about other cultures, reflect on my own cultural background and improve my intercultural communicative competency. Nevertheless, I also had a heavy workload, due to the combination of the content and organizational aspects of both seminars while being a student myself.

4 Conclusion and Prospect

With the seminar concept “VIEW: Virtual Intercultural Exchange Worldwide” we want to promote intercultural exchange and discussions for as many students as possible in a virtual learning environment. In practice, this theoretical framework has certainly proven its worth. In our opinion, it is a very enriching experience for students as well as for lecturers. However, it is important to note that the practical implementation has also revealed numerous challenges.

The students enjoyed the virtual exchange. At the same time some of them enquired if there was a chance of additional face-to-face meetings for at least a few days in one of the countries. A blended mobility seminar could be a further improvement of that online seminar, but of course that is linked to some other challenges such as organizational issues (e.g. semester terms, funding), as well as the willingness and opportunity of the students to stay abroad for some time. Thus, in summer semester 2024 and winter semester 24/25 two blended seminars were planned.

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