



Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education

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



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Virtual Exchange: A Comparative View of Teaching and Learning in Elementary Education

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This article gives an insight into the virtual exchange course "A Comparative View of Teaching and Learning in Elementary Education", in which students from Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) in Germany and students from the University of Latvia worked together on a range of topics over a period of 12 weeks in 2021 and 2022. The course provides participants with a comparative overview of elementary education in two countries; alongside experiencing the other country's education system, participants investigate fundamental aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment at its elementary schools. Students tackle tasks together online in small groups, usually comprising six students (three from Germany and three from the other country), and engage in discussion, sharing views specific to their own national backgrounds. The course was selected by the Innovation in Learning Institute at FAU as an example of good practice in online teaching and nominated, in the context of the EU funded FRAMES project, as a positive scenario relating to the adoption and accreditation of virtual exchange programs in higher education across Europe. It recently received an award for excellence in teaching from FAU's Department of Education.

Schlagworte: primary education; COIL; virtual exchange
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Virtual Exchange: A Comparative View of Teaching and Learning in Elementary Education

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Abstract

This article gives an insight into the virtual exchange course “A Comparative View of Teaching and Learning in Elementary Education”, in which students from Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) in Germany and students from the University of Latvia worked together on a range of topics over a period of 12 weeks in 2021 and 2022. The course provides participants with a comparative overview of elementary education in two countries; alongside experiencing the other country’s education system, participants investigate fundamental aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment at its elementary schools. Students tackle tasks together online in small groups, usually comprising six students (three from Germany and three from the other country), and engage in discussion, sharing views specific to their own national backgrounds.

The course was selected by the Innovation in Learning Institute at FAU as an example of good practice in online teaching¹ and nominated, in the context of the EU funded FRAMES project, as a positive scenario relating to the adoption and accreditation of virtual exchange programs in higher education across Europe². It recently received an award for excellence in teaching from FAU’s Department of Education³.

Keywords: primary education, COIL, virtual exchange

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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWmCuipIKAE>. Retrieved, August 8, 2023.

2 <https://frames-project.eu/outputs/scenarios/cases/>. Retrieved, August 8, 2023.

3 <https://www.phil.fau.de/studium/qualitaetsmanagement/qualitaetspolitik/lehrpreis/>. Retrieved, August 8, 2023.

1 Initial Situation

The German Rectors' Conference, a body representing the interests of Germany's higher education sector, has noted that "teaching staff are increasingly required to manage heterogeneous groups of learners characterized by cultural diversity – a task they will be better able to perform if they have acquired intercultural skills during their training. The internationalization of teacher education is therefore receiving ever greater attention [at the current time]." (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, 2018, p.3) Alongside traditional forms of internationalization in the higher education context, such as study abroad and student internships in other countries, institutions are increasingly emphasizing internationalization at home which centers on incorporating international and intercultural aspects of education into curricular content and teaching methodology. One practice which has emerged in this context is virtual exchange. The virtual exchange course "A Comparative View of Teaching and Learning in Elementary Education" picks up on this development. The web-based learning offered in the course gives students the opportunity to compare and reflect on key issues of elementary education while working with students from international partner universities.

2 Objectives, Target Group, Setting and Dates of the Course

The course was designed to achieve learning objectives as follows:

- Students are able to specify distinctive elements of education systems and of teaching, learning, and assessment in elementary schools in different countries.
- Students are able to use digital tools to collaborate effectively in transnational groups.
- Students are able to communicate effectively online in intercultural groups.
- Students have experienced a range of different perspectives and reflected on issues in their own culture and on similarities and differences among cultures.

The target group of the course is second- and third-year students in initial elementary teacher education. The course took place in collaboration with the University of Latvia in 2021 and 2022.

3 Educational Approach of the Course

The core underlying principles of this course are:

- A shared syllabus approach and the progressive exchange model for virtual exchange
- Facilitated online dialogue

3.1 Shared Syllabus Approach and Progressive Exchange Model in Virtual Exchange

The course is based on the shared syllabus approach (O'Dowd, 2018, p. 7) of virtual exchange. Its aims are to enrich students' degree courses with international points of view and to advance students' digital and intercultural competencies.

It follows the established task sequence of the progressive exchange model (Müller-Hartmann, O'Dowd & colleagues from the EVALUATE Group, 2019, p. 9):

"Task 1: Information Exchange: Getting to Know Each Other.

Task 2: Comparing and Analyzing Cultural Practices.

Task 3: Working on a Collaborative Product."

3.2 Facilitated Online Dialogue in Virtual Exchange

3.2.1 Principal Objectives of Facilitated Online Dialogue in Virtual Exchange

Online intercultural dialogue in the context of virtual exchange supports the development of foreign language skills, intercultural competencies, and digital literacy. A dialogic approach to online intercultural exchange defines dialogue as a process involving critical thinking, with the aim of uncovering participants' assumptions and biases and providing a space for their re-evaluation (Helm, 2016, pp. 150–171). Facilitated online dialogue supports the exposure of learners to a range of divergent perspectives by engaging participants in dialogue with peers whose view of key issues differs from their own (Helm, 2016, p. 167).

3.2.2 Key Principles of Facilitated Online Dialogue in Virtual Exchange.

The following principles of facilitated online dialogue are important in virtual exchange courses:

- Creating a friendly, safe space: Participants should feel welcome, comfortable, and safe, and that the environment is supportive and friendly.
- Supporting understanding: Participants may have varying levels of English proficiency and internet connections of differing quality. Both factors can lead to unequal levels of participation among the group. This underlines the importance of supporting participants' understanding by, for instance, providing summaries of discussions and frequent "checking in" with participants to ensure they understand.
- Promoting interaction: Various types of activities can promote interaction among participants. They include icebreakers, asking questions or more structured activities. Facilitators can call on participants directly and encourage them to share their experiences (Helm, 2016, pp. 156–166). The inclusion of a variety of activities, discussions, and group work in the course, in line with the key principles of facilitated online dialogue, can boost students' active engagement with one another and the course content.

4 Course Design

4.1 Platform

The course is hosted on MS Teams, which combines synchronous and asynchronous tools and finds frequent use in university teaching as well as in schools. The use of various channels, for the course as a whole and small groups, and content tabs (such as WhoIsWho and tabs for each week) provide a clear structure to the course.

4.2 Timeframe and Group Size

Taking participant workload (self-study, collaboration in transnational teams, and synchronous components) and students' differing academic timetables into consideration, the course is designed for a 12-week period. Each course has places for approximately twelve students from each university, who then work together in four transnational groups.

The initial phase of the course entails an introduction to its structure and objectives, activities to help participants get to know one another, formation of small groups, and an introduction to the principles of intercultural and transnational communication and collaboration. After this, students work in their transnational "teams" (three students each from FAU and the partner university), on topics as follows:

- comparing education systems internationally,
- comparing teaching and learning in the elementary schools of the two countries involved in the course,
- comparing assessment procedures in elementary schools in the two countries.

4.3 Flipped Classroom

Following the widely known flipped classroom design approach (this approach was also used in Brück-Hübner, Müller, Joseph, et al., 2024, in this anthology), participants first study key concepts in each topic on their own via interactive modules incorporating assignments that serve to deepen their understanding of the topic. All modules follow the same clear structure:

▼  -Week 3+4: Education Systems-

- ▶  1 Introduction
- ▶  2 Start
- ▶  3 Information
- ▶  4 Well done!
- ▶  5 References
- ▶  6 Back to the course start page

Figure 1: Example of a self-study module from the course

4.4 Transnational Collaboration

The students then research key facts about elementary education in the other country, compile the results in their transnational group, and supplement their findings with important aspects of elementary education in their own country. As a collaborative product of the group work phases, each group creates a short PowerPoint presentation in MS Teams, on the topics of “education systems,” “teaching and learning,” and “assessment.” At the end of the course, the participants of each group merge their PowerPoint presentations to create a single, multimodal presentation.

4.5 Asynchronous Discussions

After this, participants engage in an asynchronous discussion in their group forum on MS Teams. They consider aspects of education in the other country that they believe could serve their own country as inspiration for improvements in its systems and practices.

4.6 Synchronous Meetings

Weekly synchronous meetings in MS Teams, lasting approximately 90 minutes and with all course participants in attendance, complement the course’s asynchronous components. At the meetings, participants reflect on the content of the self-study modules, the topics on which they are working together, and the process of collaboration. The aim of these discussions is to compare and contrast country-specific factors and practices and to enable individual participants to share their personal experience of the topics that arise and of working together in transnational settings. During the synchronous sessions, discussions take place involving all participants and in the small groups, building on the facilitated online dialogue model for virtual exchange as set out on soliya.net⁴ (see above). Various activities, both including all participants and taking place in the small-group setting, help students to engage. Alongside the synchronous meetings, the lecturers meet once a week to reflect on the last synchronous session and plan and discuss the upcoming session in detail.

4.7 Assessment, Final Presentation, and Course Credits

At the end of the course, each group gives their multimodal presentation to the other participants, who provide peer feedback online. Both participating universities award 4 ECTS credit points to their students for completion of the course. In the context of the EU funded FRAMES project⁵, the course has been nominated as a positive scenario relating to the adoption and accreditation of virtual exchange programs in higher education across Europe.

4.8 Dissemination of Course Results to a Broader Audience

In 2021 and 2022, participants gave presentations on some results of the collaborative group work from the last two courses at the virtual International Students’ Research

⁴ <https://soliya.net/>. Retrieved, August 8, 2023.

⁵ <https://frames-project.eu/outputs/scenarios/cases/>. Retrieved, August 8, 2023.

Conference in Riga⁶, on the gather.town platform⁷. This gave students the opportunity to engage with a broader audience. At the same time, the gather.town environment served as a student fair for students from the University of Latvia interested in spending an Erasmus+ semester at FAU and vice versa.

5 Course Evaluation and Learnings

The course team sought specific feedback from participants via questionnaires which are currently widely in use for the evaluation of virtual exchanges in teacher education. Evaluation took place qualitatively and quantitatively using a classic pretest-posttest design that sought to adopt the participants' perspective. Selected questionnaires were used, which were also part of the EVALUATE Project (Baroni et al., 2019). The evaluation found that participants showed an increase in pedagogical content knowledge and in intercultural communicative competencies.

Overall, it is apparent that participants benefited from the course's design and the manner of its implementation. Lecturers were able to track students' learning experience as they engaged in cross-institutional and transnational collaboration, via – to name an example – the weekly project meetings at which lecturers reflected on the previous sessions, updated the upcoming sessions, and finalized the planning.

Essentially, the lecturers considered their experience with this virtual exchange course to bear out key findings of the EVALUATE project, as follows:

- Virtual exchange acts as a driver of innovation and international learning in the university setting.
- Virtual exchange is a complex learning activity which requires incorporation into a formal educational framework and guidance from educators.
- The success of virtual exchange depends on person-to-person engagement.

6 Points for Reflection: Criteria for the Success of the Course and Potential Improvements for the Next Iteration

Reflection on the experience of teaching and learning that emerged from the course highlights the significance of commitment and engagement on the part of the lecturers, and of the student participants. Flexibility, composure, and good humor, likewise shown by lecturers and participants alike, appear similarly important.

Participant feedback has led to the planned adoption of improvements in the next iteration of the course, as follows:

6 <https://www.isrc.lu.lv/en/>. Retrieved, August 8, 2023.

7 <https://gather.town>

- The course will use modified, more concise versions of the asynchronous self-study modules.
- Participants will have access to a best practice example of a multimodal presentation at the outset of the course to give them a clearer picture of what is expected of them in the final assessment.
- Participants will receive an additional two weeks to finalize their multimodal presentations.

Overall, the course was an unforgettable learning experience for both students and lecturers. With the modifications described above the next course should also be an exciting learning experience for everyone.

Its next run will be in collaboration with the Academic College Levinsky-Wingate in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Further details on the structure, content, and objectives of the course are available at <https://www.studon.fau.de/lm2922267.html>⁸.

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⁸ Retrieved, August 8, 2023.

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