2 What do we exchange in virtual exchange? Reflections on virtual exchange as intercultural dialogue

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Abstract

On its website, APVEA reminds us that "virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs". This chapter addresses the question of what we exchange when we engage in virtual exchange by exploring the meaning and value of virtual exchange as intercultural dialogue, and by considering the impact of the technological medium on the process. A small group of expert practitioners (N=6) were consulted for their views on virtual exchange. Their responses sketch a picture in which virtual exchange stretches beyond transaction into interaction among and transformation of the participants. The expert practitioners value virtual exchange for enhancing employability and foremost for its dialogic qualities. Next, the chapter explores the meaning of dialogue more deeply from a Bohmian perspective and considers applications in organizational development (Isaacs, 1999), restorative justice (Pranis, 2005), and intercultural competence development (Deardorff, 2020). When the intercultural dimension is made salient, this creates additional chances for realizing the dialogue principles of participation, coherence, awareness, and unfolding. The chapter then illustrates how intercultural dialogue is reshaped in a virtual environment as it is mediated by the technological context in which it is conducted. Specific attention is paid to the circle, the talking piece, and the facilitator. The chapter concludes by stating that, although

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intercultural dialogue will always be mediated by technology in virtual exchange settings, it makes good sense to speak of 'virtual dialogue' in situations that take the core principles, practices, and structural components of dialogue as outlined in this chapter as a starting point for designing online intercultural dialogue activities.

Keywords: virtual exchange, dialogue, intercultural competence, virtual intercultural dialogue.

1.   Introduction

What is the role of educators in a world that is characterized by increasing diversity, even super-diversity (Vertovec, 2017), while discourses of polarization and acts of discrimination remain widely spread? The nearly ubiquitous availability of the internet provides a powerful platform for fostering knowledge, understanding, and friendships across borders yet it has also shown another face as a terrifying tool for invading privacy, spreading fake news, and fueling hatred. Nevertheless, in the face of such threats, educators across the world have sought and often realized new chances for development of foreign language proficiency, cultural knowledge of the other, intercultural understanding, teamwork skills, or all of the above, through what has become known as virtual exchange. What is more, the corona pandemic that struck the world in 2020 served as a forceful reminder that there may be times and situations when virtual is the only available mode for exchange.

When one takes the beginner's course on the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange platform[2], one learns that "[v]irtual exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology" (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, 2019, n.p.). This is no small feat given the high complexity of setting up, maintaining, and leveraging virtual

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2. https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual_en

exchange in educational contexts, as any reader who has personally engaged in it will attest. Aside from the organizational and technological challenges, McLuhan's (1964) old dictum – 'the medium is the message' – is as relevant as ever when it comes to the impact of the characteristics of digital media on the nature and the meaning of communication in virtual exchange. Yet, it seems that the learning processes and outcomes that educators are seeking are affected by the digital context in which they are realized in ways that have not sufficiently been recognized. In her extensive review of published studies, Avgousti (2018) points out the impact of specific (multi-) modalities in online intercultural exchanges, particularly in the context of L2 learning. In his overview of the emerging field of intercultural new media studies, Shuter (2012) draws attention to the fact that intercultural communication knowledge and theory are still largely rooted in a twentieth-century paradigm of face-to-face interaction and that it hence remains unclear to what extent existing definitions of notions such as 'cultural identity', 'intercultural competence', or 'intercultural dialogue' are applicable to the virtual world. After examining the available research, he concludes that while factors from the physical world may also impinge on outcomes in the virtual world, intercultural dialogue, for example, "may be governed by different processes in virtual communities than organic ones [and that therefore, it] may be necessary to utilize multiple new media platforms to achieve intercultural dialogue" in a virtual world (Shuter, 2012, p. 226).

Fortunately, educators who are considering engaging in virtual exchange can increasingly rely on formal and informal support networks, including dedicated associations like the Asia-Pacific Virtual Exchange Association[3], and can benefit from (online) training such as that offered by Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. The latter program targets young adults from Europe and the Southern Mediterranean "to have a meaningful intercultural experience by engaging in online facilitated dialogue as part of their formal or non-formal education" (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, 2019, n.p.). This educational purpose is intrinsically linked to the wider socio-political calls for the promotion of the values of tolerance and

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3. https://apvea.org/

non-discrimination that followed brutal terrorist attacks in several European capitals during the preceding years (e.g. European Union Education Ministers, 2015). The Soliya Connect program (2007-2020) provides another example in which educators bring together university students from the 'Western' and the 'predominantly Muslim' societies in online dialogue groups to explore global themes and increase intercultural understanding. These examples demonstrate that it would be too restrictive to study and write about virtual exchange as purely a trend in educational technology. Viewed from a broader societal perspective, new communication technologies can be seen to serve exchange and dialogue in that they allow more immediate connections between learners who are located across geographical and cultural fault lines than might otherwise be possible. From an institutional point of view, virtual exchange can hence be mobilized as a means to implement 'internationalization at home' policies[4]. At a deeper level, it can be welcomed as an antidote to the rather grim conclusion that "the age of instant communication is also an age of instant miscommunication and instant conflict or even worse" (Jia, 2019, p.7).

Starting from these observations, the present chapter addresses the question of what we exchange when we engage in virtual exchange by exploring successively the key components of the earlier cited definition on the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange platform: the notion of virtual exchange, the notion of intercultural dialogue, and the impact of digital technology on intercultural dialogue.

2.　　Virtual exchange

2.1.　　The object and value of virtual exchange

On its homepage, quoting INTENT, APVEA reminds us that "virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs"[5]. Virtual exchange is used here in a generic sense, comprising practices such

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4. https://research.ncl.ac.uk/atiah/about/

5. https://apvea.org/

as e-tandem, teletandem, e-twinning, telecollaboration, collaborative online international learning, and open virtual mobility (see e.g. O'Dowd, 2020; Rajagopal et al., 2020). While this definition states the context in which the exchange takes place ('education') and refers to its medium ('technology-enabled'), duration ('sustained'), and actors ('people-to-people'), it omits any information about what exactly is exchanged in virtual exchanges. Neither does it indicate what is deemed of value to the participants in these exchanges. In order to formulate an answer, six expert practitioners of virtual exchange (Table 1) were presented with this widespread definition of virtual exchange and the following complementary questions: (1) what exactly is exchanged in virtual exchange, and (2) what do you value most about virtual exchange as you have experienced it?

Table 1.   Profile of the Respondents (R)

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
Gender	F	F	M	F	F	F
Residence	Belgium	Belgium	Belgium	UK	Netherlands	Italy
Response	written	written	written	written	written	oral online (transcribed)
Status	All respondents work at a university with over ten years' experience in online education as educators and as researchers in this domain.					

2.1.1.   *What exactly is exchanged in virtual exchange?*

The responses about the nature of the object of exchange can be arranged in the following approximate order from low to high complexity: "bits, clustered in data, representing information and presented as text, audio, and/or video" (R3); "messages" (R4); "materials, artifacts" (R5); "knowledge" (R1, R4, R6); "expertise" (R4); "ideas" (R3, R5); "opinions" (R4, R6); "views on life and society" (R1); and "insights into different perspectives" (R1, R4).

The named objects of exchange can be seen to cover different stages of what Pine and Gilmore (1999) refer to as "the progression of valuable intelligence" (pp. 188-189). At the bottom there is *noise*, 'bits', an abundance of unorganized

observations with little or no meaning. When observations are codified, they become *data*. When these data are delivered to others as 'messages' within a common frame of reference, we speak of *information*. On the next rung of the ladder, we find *knowledge*, which is intelligence that is gained from and applied through experiences. Several respondents also draw attention to the fact that what is shared in virtual exchange often did not exist before the experience, referring to "ideas generated in the process of the interaction" (R4) and "exchanges that can be typified as knowledge co-construction" (R5). At the top, Pine and Gilmore (1999) put the *wisdom* that is gained through (at times painful) experience and is required for transformation. The offering at this ultimate stage "is not, however, the wisdom itself; that is only a means. The offering is the changed individual" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 191).

Seen as a transformation activity, virtual exchange goes beyond the sort of transaction that its name seems to imply: *you have something that is of value to me more than it is to you, and I have something that can be of value to you, so let us swap, thereby adding value to each other in the transaction.* Instead, as the respondents recognize, what is at stake is jointly constructed in the interaction and consequently, in virtual exchange activities, relational work has to be a constant focus alongside the task at hand. For instance,

> "When teams start to work together, they are advised to take the time to get to know each other, for the reason that when conflict occurs there is a basis of trust to make it easier to work through it. In this case, we could ask rather what didn't they exchange?" (R4).

The fact that transformative learning requires effort and can be painful is echoed by the respondents through the recurrent mentioning of obstacles and borders that need to be crossed: e.g. "the aim […] is to bridge gaps or cross borders between countries (regions, continents) and cultures" (R3); "working together [a]cross many borders (physical and virtual, real and artificial) and experiencing and reflecting on what it means and what it takes" (R5). The value of virtual exchange is here seen to reside in the transformation that takes place in each learner. As one respondent puts it:

"becoming a [virtual exchange] facilitator is extremely engaging; I wish I could facilitate more. I have seen the budding of the transformation; people start thinking about things they haven't thought about before. They say at the end: I hadn't realized how prejudiced I was" (R6).

2.1.2.   What do you value most about virtual exchange as you have experienced it?

In line with their view of virtual exchange as an activity of joint creation, the expert practitioners put forward the following values: openness, inclusiveness, respect, trust, safety, and authenticity. With respect to authenticity, R6 clarifies that when designing a virtual exchange project, educators have to make sure they create a genuine need for communicating with the cultural other: "why bother having an exchange if they can learn it from you"? Other examples include: "create more authentic person-to-person connections" (R1); "inclusive and participatory communication" (R4); "openness and respect" (R3); "the trusted environment" (R1); "familiarity and trust" (R2); and "a safe and low-stakes situation" (R4).

As will become clear in next section, these are the same values that characterize dialogue. In this respect it is not surprising that in some occasions on their website Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange replaces the reference to 'education programs' used in the INTENT definition with the term 'dialogues': "technology-enabled, people-to-people *dialogues* sustained over a period of time" (https://europa.eu/youth/node/54451_en; emphasis added).

2.2.   Virtual exchange and employability

If one enrolls for the introductory course to dialogue facilitation on Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange , one learns that virtual exchange has another aim besides enabling people to have a meaningful intercultural experience. Virtual exchange, it is stated, "also fosters the development of what have been recognized as employability skills such as digital competence […] foreign language competence, communication skills, media literacy and the ability to work in a

diverse cultural context"[6]. Such skills can be referred to as employability skills because they "relate to generic personal and interpersonal qualities which are independent of the field of study [… and are] transferable" (Jones, 2013, p. 96) in the sense that they represent "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations" (Yorke, 2006, p. 8).

Interestingly, most respondents mention one or more employability skills in their answers to the question about what they value most in virtual exchange. Their responses cover language and communication skills – e.g. "listening to each other" (R6); "improve everyone's use of English as a lingua franca, particularly those for whom it's a L1" (R4) – and e-media literacy – e.g. "educating good digital citizens of the Web" (R1). One respondent (R2) illustrates the employability factor with reference to a specific task: "video recording yourself prior to e.g. online job interview will raise the awareness of the context of interaction, the quality of the message and the efficiency". This task is featured on the open online platform for assessing intercultural communicative competence that was developed within the CEFcult project (2009-2011, EU Lifelong Learning Program; see Van Maele, Baten, Beaven, & Rajagopal, 2013). After recording themselves with the webcam while they practice for a virtual job screening interviews, learners can offer these recordings for language and cultural assessment to assessors of their choice, including peers, experts, and themselves (self-assessment). As mentioned in Van Maele et al. (2013, pp. 250-252), they are allowed to record themselves as often as they want, and maintain full control over which performance they submit for assessment or export to their portfolios. CEFcult follows the pedagogy underlying the use of personal learning environments: networked learners, in control of their learning, use the technological tools to support and create their own environment for learning, for connecting and interacting with resources and people (Drexler, 2010). The authenticity of the task and the criteria was validated by collaborating with managers from internationally operating companies. As such, CEFcult presents an illustration of how virtual

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6. https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/

exchange can be explicitly leveraged for employability of participating students.

2.3.   Dialogue

As the discussion above makes clear, virtual exchange is valued for and defined in terms of its dialogic qualities. This raises the question of how dialogue should be understood in this context. In search for an answer, we will first go to the etymological roots and turn to Bohm's (1999) perspective on dialogue. Further insights into the notion will be gleaned from dialogue applications in organization development and restorative justice, and in intercultural competence development.

2.3.1.   The meaning of dialogue

Although it is sometimes used in a looser sense, its etymology clearly sets dialogue apart from practices such as debate (Latin *battere*: to fight), discussion (Latin *dis-quatere*: to shake apart), or conversation (Indo-European *vertere*: to turn around, to bend) (Harper, 2001-2020). For instance, in the introductory course for facilitators offered through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (2019), dialogue is explicitly distinguished from debate. In a debate, participants are focused on beating the opponent; they listen to form counterarguments and defend their assumptions as truth. Dialogue, by contrast, is a joint search for community understanding; participants listen to find meaning in what others say and they re-evaluate their assumptions. Its meaning can be traced back to the classic Greek roots *dia* (through, among, between) and *logos* (word):

> "[t]he picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a *stream of meaning* flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding" (Bohm, 1999, p. 6; italics in original).

This etymological gloss on dialogue suggests that the transformation that is valued in virtual exchange does not result from external pressure (as would be

the case in debates, discussions, and conversations) but stems from suspending our assumptions, attending to our thoughts behind the assumptions that perceive the world in a fragmentary way, widening our attention, listening to find shared meanings, and working toward coherence. This is the approach to dialogue that was articulated by David Bohm (1999), the famous 20th century physicist, who arguably wrote one of the most profound reflections on the topic. The principles of Bohmian dialogue have since been applied to other fields, including organization development (Isaacs, 1999). A related source of knowledge is various ancestral traditions of peacemaking – also cited by Bohm (1999, p. 16) as an inspiration – which have been revived in the form of circle processes in restorative justice (Pranis, 2005) and as story circles in intercultural competence development (Deardorff, 2020). It is to these fields that we now turn to glean additional insights into the meaning of dialogue before addressing Shuter's (2012) earlier quoted statement that intercultural dialogue as defined in face-to-face literature may be difficult to achieve in virtual communities.

2.3.2.   Implementing dialogue in organization development and restorative justice

According to Isaacs (1999), founder of the Dialogue Project at MIT Sloan School of Management, problems within large corporations often stem from an inability to conduct a successful dialogue. Isaacs (1999) proposes dialogue, which he refers to as "shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together" (p. 9), as an alternative for more conventional approaches to the way meetings are conducted, namely with "an agenda, a clear purpose and predetermined outcome for every step of the process, and someone to 'drive' the process" (p. 331). Table 2 summarizes his understanding of dialogue: it lists the four practices that are key to building the capacity for dialogue, the central questions that are at stake for each practice, and the corresponding principles that inform each of the practices (based on Isaacs, 1999, pp. 419-420). To give an example that already anticipates the intercultural dimension of dialogue: according to Isaacs (1999), the practice of respecting refers to seeing the other as legitimate; as a whole being. "If you respect someone, you do not intrude. At the same time, if you respect someone, you do not withhold yourself or distance yourself from

them" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 114). The underlying principle is that of coherence; an understanding of wholeness: "for us to perceive something, it must somehow be in us, or it literally would not connect to anything in us" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 125). Consequently, the central question related to the practice of respecting is *how does this fit?*. What is at stake is the recognition that the otherness and strangeness that you experience when interacting with other people is already in you and part of the whole.

Table 2.   Isaacs's (1999) dialogue practices

Core practices	Key questions	Core principles
Listening	How does this feel?	Participation
Respecting	How does this fit?	Coherence
Suspending	How does this work?	Awareness
Voicing	What needs to be said?	Unfoldment

Pranis (2005), who served as a restorative justice planner in the USA, addresses the use of 'talking circles' in the criminal justice system and the wider communities to settle disputes and enable healing. The physical format of the circle is essential because it "symbolizes shared leadership, equality, connection and inclusion. It also promotes focus, accountability, and participation from all" (Pranis, 2005, p. 11). Other structural elements of the circle process are listed in Table 3 (based on Pranis, 2005, pp. 33-37). A talking piece refers to any object "passed from person to person in a group and which grants the holder sole permission to speak" or to offer silence (Pranis, 2005, p. 3). Consequently, as Pranis (2005) points out, two people cannot go back and forth at each other when they disagree. This turns the talking piece into "a powerful equalizer" while it "weaves a connecting thread among the members of the circle" (Pranis, 2005, p. 36). Her description of the circle process clearly echoes the values that the expert practitioners cited with respect to virtual exchange. Aside from the values of connection, inclusion, and participation, Pranis (2005) emphasizes the need to create an environment that is based on "what the participants need to make the space safe to speak in their authentic voices [… and that ensures] respectful speaking and listening and some form of confidentiality" (p. 34).

Given the shared set of values and the strong correspondence of the processes, Pranis's (2005) description provides us with a relevant set of characteristics for exploring to what extent dialogue can be achieved in virtual exchange.

Table 3.   Pranis's (2005) structural elements of circle processes

Ceremony	Opening and closing ceremonies mark the time and space of the circle as a space apart.
Guidelines	The commitments or promises that participants make to one another about how they will behave in the circle. The entire circle, not just the facilitator, is responsible for the creation and implementation of the guidelines.
Talking piece	The talking piece slows the pace of the conversation and encourages thoughtful and reflective interactions.
Facilitating	The facilitator's role is to initiate a space that is respectful and safe, and to engage participants in sharing responsibility for the space and their work.

2.4.   Intercultural dialogue

2.4.1.   *The meaning of intercultural dialogue*

A recent survey on intercultural dialogue by Unesco (2018) concludes that "to date, there is no universally agreed formal definition of intercultural dialogue or a single one-size-fits-all model of implementation" (p. 16). Nevertheless, various scholars and organizations have provided their own definition, including the Council of Europe (2008):

> "intercultural dialogue is understood as a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect" (p. 17).

However, Van Maele and Mertens (2014) point out that encounters cannot *a priori* be qualified to be intercultural or not by referring to the presence or absence of differences in group memberships. According to Barrett et al. (2013),

encounters can be characterized as intercultural when the participants themselves perceive its intercultural dimension and make it salient. In this respect, Borghetti (2017) refers to "how individuals socially position themselves in interactions [...], to their awareness of such positioning, and to their willingness and ability to recognize and negotiate the others' multiple identities as much as their own" (p. 2) as more relevant considerations. Consequently, we could posit that a dialogue can be qualified as intercultural when the cultural diversity within the group is made topical or is experienced as significant by one or more of the participants in the dialogue. Particularly in the case of perceived difference or strangeness, this will create additional challenges – but also chances – for realizing the earlier cited practice of respecting in dialogue. Can the participants in intercultural dialogue see the coherence on which any perceived differences rest, and still engage with the other as a whole being?

2.4.2.   Implementing intercultural dialogue
in intercultural competence development

The Unesco (2018) survey on intercultural dialogue concludes that there is no one-size-fits-all model of implementation and that instead "the emphasis is placed on the specific context of the country" (p.16). Although Deardorff (2020) acknowledges the situational component, she presents a method for developing intercultural competence that can work across countries, relating the work of Pranis (2005) and others to the universal tradition of storytelling. After testing the method in a variety of contexts around the world, she offers a manual for using story circles as a powerful tool for developing intercultural competence. Her method directs participants to sharing their own experiences of interculturality through the use of prompts like "what is one of the most positive interactions you have had with a person(s) who is different from you, and what made this such a positive experience?" (Deardorff, 2020, p. 35), and through a guided debriefing of their story circle experience.

Intercultural dialogue is named as one of the contexts in which story circles can be put to use. More specifically, story circles can be integrated in dialogue to support participants in empathic listening: "dialogue participants come

together first through story circles to practice *listening for understanding* and gaining insights on each other's perspectives before engaging in further dialogue across difference" (Deardorff, 2020, p. 17; italics in original). The central values (openness and respect) and the principal competencies that are honed through story circles bear a strong resemblance to Isaacs' cited practices and principles of dialoguing. Story circles, Deardorff (2020) states, promote the following intercultural competencies: "demonstrating respect for others, practicing listening for understanding, cultivating curiosity about similarities and differences with others, gaining increased cultural self-awareness, developing empathy, and developing relationships with culturally different others" (p. 16; italics deleted). To this she adds further guidelines that remind participants to avoid making assumptions and to refrain from judgmental comments (Deardorff, 2020, p. 53). Table 4 demonstrates the extent to which story circles inscribe themselves in the here articulated view on dialogue. For the first three practices and principles of dialoguing, there is a direct connection between Isaacs's (1999) definition of dialogue and Deardorff's (2020) description of the central competencies in story circles. As far as 'voicing' and 'unfoldment' is concerned, the relation is more implicit. Nevertheless, it is not hard to see that expressing oneself through meaningful life stories would qualify as a fine example of voicing, and that the many distinct stories that we hear from others may well resonate with us because those stories are unfolding "from a common source [… and appear as] the explicate versions of some more implicate order [… that is like a] constant potential waiting to unfold through and around us" (Isaacs, 1999, pp. 166, 168).

In Deardorff's view, story circles are conducted on site with all participants physically present in the room. Virtual story circles are not impossible – as a matter of fact, Unesco has started running virtual story circles and training facilitators (Deardorff, personal communication, September 21, 2020) – but they are not the preferred choice: "[i]t is ideal for participants to be face-to-face when sharing their stories. However, there may be times when this can be done via technology (such as Skype or FaceTime)" (Deardorff, 2020, p. 54). No explanation is given for granting this deficiency position to technology-enabled story circles. In the final section we shall consider to what extent such

a position could be justified by examining how dialogue has been implemented in online environments.

Table 4. Comparing characteristics of dialogue (Isaacs, 1999) and story circles (Deardorff, 2020)

Core practices of dialogue	Intercultural competencies through story circles	Core principles of dialogue	Intercultural competencies through story circles
Listening	Practicing listening for understanding	Participation	Developing relationships with culturally different others
Respecting	Demonstrating respect for others	Coherence	Understanding across differences
Suspending	Avoid making assumptions; refrain from judgmental comments	Awareness	Gaining increased cultural self-awareness
Voicing	Expressing oneself through meaningful life stories	Unfoldment	Recognizing individual stories as the explicate version of a common source

3.   Virtual intercultural dialogue

Now that we have carefully examined the characteristics of intercultural dialogue, we can return to consider Shuter's (2012) statement that intercultural dialogue, as it has been defined in the face-to-face literature, may be difficult to achieve in virtual communities. Virtual here means 'technology-enabled', "preferably based on regular synchronous or near-synchronous meetings using high social presence media" (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, 2019). The discussion below addresses the broader question whether current e-environments promote online dialogue by considering the communicative affordances and constraints of the format and the interface. More specifically, we look at intercultural dialogue as it is enabled in Soliya Connect (Soliya, 2007-2020), which is also the platform

that serves as the model in the beginner's course for facilitators on Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (2019), and discuss how it shapes three of the elements in Pranis's (2005) description of dialogue: the circle, the talking piece, and the facilitator. Together, these elements illustrate how dialogue is reshaped in a virtual environment as it is mediated by the technological context in which it is conducted.

3.1. Virtual talking circle

Dialogues tend to be conducted in a circle because this shape expresses equality and creates connection and inclusion (Pranis, 2005). The idea that the lay-out of the environment can promote or constrain certain communicative behaviors is not new and has also been examined outside the virtual world (see e.g. XML, 2016, on the architecture of parliaments around the world). Virtual dialogues can be conducted in a hybrid onsite-online format or take place in entirely virtual environments. Hybrid virtual meeting systems such as TelePresence can create the illusion that all participants, both participants who are physically present and those joining from a distance, sit together at a single meeting table that stretches from the onsite meeting room into the virtual world (Cisco, 2019). I have not come across this degree of verisimilitude in fully virtual rooms yet although developers have created circular lay-outs there as well. In Soliya, for example, participants are arranged in a circle because this is "held to be more conducive to dialogue" (Helm, 2015, p. 5). It would be rash to conclude from this that a circular seating pattern will avoid power imbalances, though. Circles, whether virtual or face-to-face, may indeed set up a propensity for shared leadership, but there is no guarantee that talking in circles will install or maintain the desired equality just by themselves.

Other imbalances in power distribution may be due to the virtual nature of the dialogue. Some participants, as Helm (2015) points out, may call in from locations with broader bandwidth and higher performance and as a result be more intelligible and more present in the dialogue than their partners in less technologically advanced settings. Power imbalance may also be inscribed in the software. In Soliya, for instance, only the facilitator is able to interrupt other

speakers while they hold the floor. Of course, this is not an intrinsic disadvantage of virtual dialogue rooms but users often have no option but to use the interface as it is provided to them. Finally, the mediated nature of virtual dialogue can also affect nonverbal communication. Think for instance of the camera angle that can represent participants as looking up to or looking down on their dialogue partners. And even if they look straight into the camera, participants can still appear to be on top or at the bottom of the circle when their pictures are arranged visually on the screen, creating further perceptions of imbalance. Therefore, the design of the interface will be a crucial factor in determining how conducive the virtual talking circle really is for a genuine dialogue experience.

3.2.   Virtual talking piece

The technical restriction of allowing only one participant to speak at a time in some online environments is somewhat reminiscent of the manner in which a talking piece operates in face-to-face dialogue. Sequential turn-taking slows down the pace of the communication and once a participant 'has' the floor, which can be visually affirmed by a lit up frame or an expanded picture, that speaker can mostly keep it without being interrupted. Nevertheless, this right may not be absolute in cases where one or more participants are granted the power to intervene, as indicated in the previous paragraph. Moreover, some platforms, including Soliya, provide a synchronous communication channel through a text chat box where participants can carry on multiple threads of conversation while their colleague holds the talking piece.

Sequential turn-taking in a virtual dialogue can also affect communication from the perspective of the listener. In comparison with face-to-face dialogue, participants will need to make certain adjustments to indicate they are actively listening. Vocal back-channeling, by humming or other sounds, to indicate encouragement or (dis)agreement is also no longer available when the auditory channel rests solely with the speaker. Listeners may have to resort to alternatives (learning forward toward the screen; arranging the camera angle to express 'eye contact'; refraining from fiddling …) to signal they are devoting the speaker their full attention. In addition, nonverbal gestures may be interpreted differently

depending on the medium. For instance, in online communication nodding will more likely be interpreted as agreement with the points made by the speaker rather than as a gentle encouragement to continue speaking (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, 2019).

3.3. Virtual facilitator

Like facilitators in face-to-face intercultural dialogue, online facilitators are foremost process leaders who have to maintain multipartiality as they act to ensure a quality discussion (Soliya, cited in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, 2019). Consequently, online facilitators need to bring the familiar facilitator skills set to their task, including skills such as active listening, mirroring, summarizing, asking good questions, and bringing other perspectives into the dialogue. Like all facilitators, they are also expected to create and maintain a safe environment for the dialogue participants in which the desired values of openness, respect, authenticity, and trust can flourish. The virtual nature of the environment, however, adds a technological dimension of security to the aforementioned requirements: what safeguards have been taken by the host to protect the ongoing dialogue and any recordings that may have been made from unwanted hackers?

Next, there is also the matter of the perceived social identity of the host of the exchange. For instance, is the person seen as 'the rich other' reaching out to participants from less economically and technologically developed areas? The perception of neutrality that is expected from the dialogue facilitator may indeed be affected by various aspects of identity (gender; religion; profession; location...), often in an implicit manner. In her analysis of transcripts from Soliya Connect, Helm (2015) shows how the facilitator sometimes discloses information about her identity without offering participants "the chance to align to her transportable identity as may happen in 'normal' conversation in which such prompts would likely open the floor to questions and conversation" (p. 9). One comes across a similar case in the introductory course for dialogue facilitators offered by Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (2019). The dialogue simulations that serve as illustrations and exercises in the course present a female facilitator who is wearing a hijab. By donning a hijab, the facilitator

discloses that she is a Muslim but, in accordance with the principle of neutrality or multipartiality, she does not make this aspect of her identity relevant in the conversation. Nevertheless, given that a central topic of the dialogue concerns attitudes toward and interaction with migrants in Europe, one may wonder to what extent the participants perceive the facilitator as neutral. The issue here is that the format and the interface of the dialogue can be seen to discourage the participants from bringing up this possible conflict whereas, as Helm indicates, this would be more likely to happen in face-to-face environments.

4.   Conclusions

From the semantic exploration that we carried out, it can be concluded that the term 'exchange' does not adequately capture the essence of what educators aim for in virtual exchange. Although it comprises a transaction of information, knowledge, opinions, and meaning, the exchange is better understood as an interaction whereby the focus not only rests on the task but also on the relationship. Above all, educators are looking to virtual exchange for the joint creation or spontaneous emergence of something new in a context which upholds values like trust, openness, respect, and authenticity. Virtual exchange even holds a promise of transformation for the participants: what we get back in the exchange is us, ourselves, our interconnected selves. The term 'dialogue', as defined by Bohm (1999) and applied in various domains by Isaacs (1999), Pranis (2005), Deardorff (2020) and others, has been shown to reflect this intended meaning more adequately than 'exchange'. Therefore, it would make sense to specify 'virtual exchange' as 'virtual dialogue' especially in contexts that aim at the interactional and transformative power of the activity. What is more, whenever the intercultural dimension is made salient by participants, this will create additional chances for acknowledging that the strangeness discovered in the other is already part of us, and hence, for a fuller realization of the dialogue principles of participation, coherence, awareness, and unfolding.

The other conclusion concerns the challenge of conducting dialogue in online environments. Specific examples like Soliya demonstrate that some of the

structural components of dialogue can indeed be transferred to an online context and applied to foster intercultural understanding. Nevertheless, this transfer is always mediated by the given format and interface, resulting in a number of communicative affordances and constraints, as illustrated in this chapter. Consequently, Shuter's (2012) hesitation to downright accept that definitions of intercultural dialogue that are rooted in face-to-face contexts can be transferred unproblematically to virtual contexts is warranted. What is needed at this point is more empirical research into the actual discourses of online intercultural dialogue by interdisciplinary teams, combining technological, pedagogical, and linguistic expertise. For dialogue remains of pivotal importance and Isaacs' words at the cusp of the 21st century, pondering the dizzying pace of change, ring as true as ever:

> "[f]unctioning with the intensities of our world requires resilience. Dialogue can help by stretching our minds to inquire into point[s] of view we might not naturally accept, and so holding more possibilities and options open" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 334).

With the support of technology, the potential of dialogue can be realized more fully, particularly if we take its core principles, practices, and structural components, as outlined in this chapter, as a starting point for designing virtual intercultural dialogue activities. As illustrated in this chapter, young adults from North America, Europe, the Mediterranean region and the Middle East have had the possibility to engage with each other in such activities through structural initiatives like Soliya and Erasmus+. It is high time that also youngsters from the Asia-Pacific region could join in this virtual intercultural dialogue as they have just as much to give and just as much to learn in making the world flourish in trust, respect, and openness.

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