DESIGNING "VIRTUAL SOCIAL EUROPE DAYS"—AN INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE SEMINAR ACROSS CLOSED BORDERS

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"Social Europe Days" is a collaborative four-day international seminar held yearly near Brussels, Belgium, by a network of ten European universities from eight different countries. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the seminar had to be offered virtually and redesigned. The final design included synchronous and asynchronous activities, informal and formal interactions, and a focus on empathy for the existential problems faced by participating students and faculty during the pandemic. This article describes the design challenges, the design choices and decisions that led to the virtual seminar design, and reflections based on lead faculty notes, member checking, and student evaluations.

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INTRODUCTION

This design case presents the design process and final design of an international seminar "Virtual Social Europe Days" (VSED), that was held online for the first time due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The seminar is hosted collaboratively by a network of ten European universities for their students and aims to promote a deeper understanding of the European Union, with special attention to social policy issues. The design challenges, choices, and decisions are detailed in this article based on the experience and design process knowledge of the lead author who led the design of the VSED (Howard et al., 2012). Furthermore, we reflect on the design and the lessons learned by this design team based on lead faculty notes, faculty debriefing sessions, and student evaluations.

CONTEXT

"Social Europe Days" (SED) is a collaborative four-day international seminar held yearly near Brussels, Belgium, by a network of ten European universities from eight different countries (Belgium, Germany, Latvia, Netherlands, Malta, Romania, Spain, and Switzerland). The seminar focuses on challenges for social work, social policy, and human resource management at the European level. The overarching aim of the seminar is for students from these universities to experience European collaboration and solidarity, to explore their European identity, and to understand the European Union's importance (a) as a peace project and (b) related to social policy, economic and labor issues that impact life across Europe (and beyond). It is attended by students enrolled in Bachelor's programs such as social work, social policy, human resource management, labor law, or gender studies with an interest in the role of the European Union. They usually earn credit for the seminar within their academic programs, but such credit varies across programs at the participating universities, and sometimes has additional requirements. In 2020, two of the student groups participated entirely voluntarily out of interest in international collaboration and for no academic credit. For the majority of the participating faculty, the SED is fully integrated into

their teaching load, and others participate because they are in charge of internationalization at their universities. In any case, the network has grown over the years with strong academic and social bonds between faculty members with a common shared commitment to the European cause.

The seminar has been successfully held for over more than 15 years. Each year, SED has been improved and adapted to reflect current and relevant content. The current seminar includes visits to the European Parliament in Brussels, field visits with social organizations or innovative (social) enterprises, student-led topical workshops (e.g., "Poverty and Social Exclusion in Europe"), a debate competition, expert talks, a cultural evening, and leisure time in Brussels for students. Between eight to ten national delegations usually participate, comprising about 140 students and 20 faculty, the lead author being one of them.

The 2020 seminar was scheduled to take place from May 11-14, 2020 near Brussels, Belgium. At the end of March, 2020 preparations that were underway were disrupted due to COVID-19, leading to discussions on whether to cancel the SED or hold it virtually. The network decided to hold an online seminar, and Virtual SED (VSED) came into existence. The main driver for this decision was that all those involved believed that European solidarity and collaboration was needed more than ever during the pandemic.

This article contains a rich description of the intentionally designed VSED experience and how it came to be (Boling, 2010). Following Smith's (2010) suggestions for a rigorous design case, the VSED design case is documented by an author who led the design and another who immersed in the project by studying the artifacts, interactions in the learning management system (LMS), student evaluations, and organizer reflections. Triangulation is ensured by a synthesis of these data sources. This article was also shared with another organizer (faculty member) to allow for member checking and to include any input based on his experiences. Some screenshots and images are used throughout this article to supplement the textual description of the seminar design. Additional multimedia products that were developed in the course of the virtual seminar (e.g., a concluding video of presentation slides and screenshots) created only for internal use cannot be shared here publicly due to privacy and use guidelines in Europe. This is because (a) written permission would be needed from every participant whose picture is shown in the screenshots of the videoconference and (b) license-free music was not used for the video as publication was not the intent at the time.

DESIGN CHALLENGES

Collaboration under Pressure

There were many challenges faced by the network of ten universities that collaboratively designs the SED. First, an

entirely online seminar had to be developed and implemented in only six weeks on a very tight timeline. Second, the process of designing and implementing the seminar also had to be done completely virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions where no face-to-face meetings were possible. Third, English was the language of communication, but it was a foreign language for all involved, which compounded the challenges of collaborating virtually under pressure. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that (a) a bigger part than usual of the collaboration depended on written communication and (b) even the oral communication within a videoconference setting has reduced contextual clues compared to a face-to-face meeting. Further, when planning the seminar, many side conversations and informal exchanges take place within the international network in other languages in small sub-groups, e.g. some faculty can communicate in Dutch, another sub-group in German. Communication in video-conferences, as well as written communication, was restricted to the official working language English.

Many routines and collaborations had been established with the traditional on-site SED seminar over the years. The two founders who served as the leaders coordinated most of the preparation work before the actual event; then during the event, tasks were always distributed spontaneously and everybody rose to the occasion. Strong social bonds and an intense team spirit ("we are family—WAF") between the network members allowed for such 'lean preparation' and 'agile management' during the on-site seminar in Brussels. The transformation of the SED to VSED disrupted these collaboration routines because faculty realized that online teaching has to be prepared much more meticulously *beforehand* and is less easily adjustable at run-time.

Changes in Leadership

The two founders of the network, who were originally the core planning team, welcomed the idea of a virtual offering of the SED, the VSED, but had no inclination toward or experience with online teaching. A new leadership team thus needed to immediately be established to plan the seminar. The lead author on this article, due to her several years of experience teaching online and researching online education, was entrusted with chairing the committee and leading the overall design process of VSED. The transformation of the on-site seminar to the virtual offering would involve a tremendous amount of work and the focus was on maintaining the quality of the seminar even if offered virtually. Therefore, more faculty members were needed who would be actively involved in the design. The new steering committee was formed by asking faculty members who had experience with online teaching or felt inclined towards online teaching to opt into the committee. A steering committee comprising six faculty members who shared an interest in online teaching was formed. Of these six members, three had a lot of experience in online teaching whereas the others had

occasionally taught online before but were very open to and optimistic about the feasibility of the endeavor. In hindsight, it so happened that all but one member of the committee was also more at ease with English written communication than the other faculty members. However, at the time of creating the steering committee, language skills were not reflected upon or intentionally used as a selection criterion.

Stakeholder Needs

The unprecedented context of the pandemic necessitated a reconsideration of the needs and affordances of all stakeholders involved in the VSED. Among students as well as faculty there was great insecurity at different levels as the pandemic raged in all eight countries. Everyone was worried about their and their families' risk of infection, adapting to new teaching and learning scenarios, and developing personal coping strategies. Simultaneously, the alerts, changes, prescriptions, and predictions by university management as well as educational ministries across the ten universities in various parts of Europe were continuously changing. These uncertainties faced by both students and faculty had to be taken into consideration when designing the VSED.

In addition to the above, students faced existential challenges because many lost their student jobs that were necessary to cover their living costs. Students who were working in the social work and care sector were faced with multiple requests to work longer hours or at entirely different times than scheduled. Homeschooling and the closure of childcare facilities additionally burdened older students with family and children, especially women. Exchange students from European international student mobility programs such as the ERASMUS program (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) who were studying abroad for a term at one of the network's universities, were suddenly confronted with a completely different set-up with all seminars moving online, very different tools and requirements, improvised ad-hoc solutions, and a great degree of social isolation in a foreign country. They could not return due to closed borders and were worried about their families back home. Another group was forced to leave their partner universities and return home.

Faculty were facing difficult situations and decisions as well. At the onset of the pandemic, it was not entirely clear whether or not teaching online would be acknowledged as fulfilling their teaching load. Furthermore, there was a great variety of instructional technology available, with little orientation as to what could work in which context. Faculty were faced with ad-hoc solutions, guidelines being developed as the term proceeded, sudden changes in recommendations and instructions, and difficult technology choices. Additionally, sudden changes were made in the academic calendar (e.g., teaching and learning were temporarily halted, the semester was extended by a number of weeks)

for several universities in the network, which increased the uncertainty and changes for faculty.

As with the steering committee, English was the official language of the VSED, but a foreign language for all the faculty and students involved in the seminar. Although this was not seen as a major challenge in the face-to-face seminar where non-verbal cues and other common languages supplemented English communication, it was perceived to be an additional barrier in the virtual seminar where the amount of written online communication was to increase and the opportunities for informal exchanges in other European languages, shared by sub-groups, would be reduced.

Difficult Technology Choices

Although the ten universities in the network had established technologies before the pandemic, several of these did not perform well at this time of crisis. For example, videoconferencing systems crashed at the onset of the crisis because they could not be scaled up to fulfill the sudden increase in demand. In adherence with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), several universities had banned the use of certain technologies due to data privacy concerns. This led to much variety in the availability of technologies among the ten universities in the network. Faculty as well as students constantly tried out and negotiated afresh which communication technology to use, also struggling with inadequate hardware and software in their homes, lack of technical support, and so on. This situation was tremendously complex and difficult for each university individually, and during the VSED, this complexity would exponentially increase given the ten universities in eight different countries that used their respective languages and the diversity of university policies regarding data privacy, in addition to GDPR.

DESIGN CHOICES & DECISIONS

The goal of the steering committee was to create a virtual seminar that would achieve the SED goals despite the pandemic. Several design choices had to be made with respect to seminar content and format. The decisions that were taken included transforming the existing design of the seminar, adding new elements, providing scaffolds and supports, planning time, and selecting technologies.

Transforming the Existing Design

The steering committee began by reviewing the existing SED design and deciding which design elements of the onsite SED should be omitted or retained for the virtual format (Table 1). Second, decisions were taken on how to transform the elements that were retained from the original design for the virtual environment.

SEMINAR ELEMENT	TRANSFORMED (T)/ OMITTED (O)	COMMITTEE RATIONALE
Welcome session	T	Important starting point and provides orientation
Getting to know each other	T	Personal connections between students and faculty from different countries is a core element of experiencing European identity, solidarity, and diversity
Student-led topical workshops	T	Important format to discuss various European social policy issues and to enable ownership of the topic by having students lead the workshops by providing the main content from their delegation's national perspective
"House of Commons" - Political debate competition	T	Political debate is an important second layer of learning goals, in addition to academic content
Cultural evening	T	Informal exchange, important for interactions beyond academic and political discussions, supports personal connections
Field visits to social organizations/ enterprises	O	Due to COVID-19, social organizations/enterprises are already overwhelmed with challenges
Expert talks	T	Important content for the learning goals of SED/VSED
Closing Session	T	Summarizing, awarding of the debate prize and closure
Leisure Time in Brussels	O	Not feasible. Cut down on informal activity due to time restraints of students
City walks in Leuven in student groups/faculty group	O	Not feasible. Cut down on informal activity due to time restraints of students/faculty

TABLE 1. Overview of these design choices and committee rationale.

Omitted Elements

Due to the pandemic, certain elements of the SED design were not feasible or would have put additional strain on students, faculty, and collaborators. This included field visits to social organizations/enterprises and leisure time or city walks in Belgian cities close to the planned seminar location

Field visits to social organizations or enterprises in the Brussels area had always been an important element of SED because they provided students with exposure and insight into how social policy issues are realized in the real world, in the practice of a social organization or business. However, during the pandemic such organizations had their own challenges and were busy with their response to the pandemic, therefore these visits were not feasible. The committee initially considered transforming this component of the SED to an online format with shared visits to organizational websites and virtual talks or interviews with invited members of the organizations. However, they concluded that this would be an unnecessary strain on the organizations during the crisis.

City walks in Leuven in student groups and faculty groups, as well as *leisure time in Brussels* had been an essential informal component of the SED where connections were made and participants bonded. These were not feasible and the experiences were not replicable virtually. Moreover, the committee

felt they should focus on the formal elements of the seminar because students and faculty were already overwhelmed by all the changes they had to deal with and their time would be limited.

Transformed Elements

For each seminar element that would be retained, the committee discussed the degree of difficulty in adapting it to the online format using three categories: *easy* to transform, *feasible* to transform and *demanding* to transform. In addition, the committee discussed initial ideas for transforming the element to the new online environment

Welcome session: The welcome session is a faculty-led orientation session to explain overall goals, content, and procedures of the seminar. It is very important for establishing common ground and appeared easy to transform into a synchronous online format. Initial thoughts for transforming the welcome session were to organize a video-conference with faculty presentations on the idea of the seminar, the overarching learning goals, the planned seminar content and timetable for general orientation. Moreover, it was discussed that the traditional keynote which usually served to jump start the VSED seminar topic of European social policy could be replaced by a virtual keynote in case the keynote speaker agreed to deliver a speech via videoconference.

After reflecting on the possible drawbacks of these ideas and finding no substantial reasons not to adapt the welcome session in this way, the committee refined these ideas for implementation. Recognizing that a three- hour video-conference for the welcome session could become very exhausting, two 5-minute breaks were included, each after a structural element of the welcome session was finished.

"Getting to know each other": This is a student-led session that serves as a "warm-up" and "icebreaker" within the international workshop groups. Its main purpose is to enable students to share experiences about student life in the different European countries involved. This knowledge provides helpful background for students to share during the content-focused sessions. This element was thus considered important, and was assessed as feasible to transform to an online format. The committee decided to transform this element using asynchronous interactions within the LMS and breakout rooms within synchronous sessions.

Student-led topical workshops: These workshops are usually a core element of SED. A workshop topic and common orientation questions are shared upfront with the delegations so that they can prepare at the beginning of the term. Each national delegation allocates its students to the ten workshop topics by letting students state three priorities and then allocating students to topics. The goal is to have each of the ten international workshop groups be more or less equal in total number of participants and total number of different national delegations. The orientation questions are developed by faculty and annually updated. Students normally work in small teams of 2-4 members to answer the questions from the national perspective of their delegation, incorporating the answers in their team's presentation. For Belgium and Germany where two different delegations exist, students are additionally asked to research characteristics or disparities distinct to their region. Each student team of a national delegation presents about the situation in their country/region with respect to the workshop topic (e.g., Poverty and Social Exclusion in Europe). This is why the workshops are called "student-led". Unlike in traditional university lectures, it is not the faculty who provides content but the students themselves, and the overall workshop value for all depends on the quality of the student presentations. Students are asked to assume the responsibility of preparing their presentations, which is in the spirit of a well-prepared performance of the national delegations that is key to the seminar. A team of two faculty members is assigned to each workshop to facilitate the discussion, keep time, and to compare and analyze different national perspectives at the end of each workshop after the students' presentations.

The committee considered these workshops to be a core element of VSED that is important to fulfill the curricular objectives and facilitate European comparison and collaboration. This element was also assessed as easy to transform

into a synchronous online format. All the preparatory work, such as distributing students to workshops, building student teams and so on, had already been done at the beginning of the term. What remained to be done was to find an adequate online format for the workshop presentations and discussions. The initial idea discussed by the committee was to run the workshop synchronously via videoconference and possibly use different break out rooms for the ten workshop groups. Finally, however, the decision was made to offer a morning and an afternoon session for five workshops each to allow students to be part of two workshops.

"House of commons" debate competition: This debate competition simulates a political debate on a crucial European social policy topic, with students as participants. Before the actual debate is started, the debate topic is usually introduced to all participants by a presentation that summarizes key arguments for and against the motion to be debated (for example 'legalize drug usage in EU-countries'). The debate competition is important to the overall learning goals as it goes beyond academic knowledge and addresses the European Union as a political union. The steering committee assessed it as feasible to transform to an online format. Initially, the committee considered conducting the debate asynchronously on the LMS as a synchronous debate with 140 participants. However, later on it seemed more feasible to split the debate in two parts, one part being implemented as part of the synchronous video conference welcome session and the second as an asynchronous debate within the chosen LMS. The synchronous part would entail the kick-off session for the debate, with a short presentation on the key arguments for and against the motion. The committee reasoned that if the debate was started this way at the video-conference attended by all the participants, it would get more attention and participation than if this element was only conducted asynchronously by instructing students to debate entirely in the LMS. A kick-off at the end of the welcome session on the first day, followed by 48 hours of possible contributions in an asynchronous discussion forum would enable better overall student engagement.

Cultural Evening: The cultural evening is a social gathering with the opportunity to share stories, sing songs, read poems, make new connections etc. It was retained because it was deemed important for the SED goal of intercultural exchange and having students explore their European identity. However, the transformation to an online format using videoconferencing was assessed as demanding to transform for the VSED. The initial idea here again was to do it synchronously as a videoconference in one voluntary session on one of the evenings. However, the committee regretted that it would not be possible to include the exchange of foods from each country, and anticipated there might be technical problems online when singing due to latency in videoconferencing.

Expert talks: Faculty or invited experts from outside the network gave talks focused on relevant European social policy topics during the SED. These talks help students grasp the vast and multi-faceted nature of European social policy, and were thus retained for the VSED. They were assessed as easy to transform into a synchronous online format. In fact, the committee considered right from the start the possibility of increasing the number of talks as the challenges of presentation space or equipment (that limited the expert talks in prior SED events at the venue near Brussels) did not exist online.

Closing Session: The last session involves the awarding of prizes for the debate competition, a summary of insights into the event and proper closing of the "gestalt" of the seminar. It was deemed equally important to have such a closing session in the VSED. It was assessed as easy to transform into a synchronous online format. The idea was to make it a true "ceremony" including music and presents if possible. Since there seemed no way of giving real presents to the winners for prize-awarding, the committee developed the idea of sending out book vouchers as awards.

Inserting New Elements

In addition to retaining or omitting established elements from the on-site SED design, the steering committee discussed whether entirely new elements would be needed and should be introduced given the online format. Three new elements were added to the seminar design (Table 2). In addition, at the organizational level, a new element called the Team Bar was added.

Apéro[1]: The online format, especially the video conferencing system, was expected to be very new for many students and faculty, therefore the "Apéro" was added to give participants an opportunity to get familiar with the new learning environment. It would act as an informal test session for participants without the pressure of academic content, the political debate, or expert talks. It was quickly agreed that this should happen a few days before the actual VSED started so that

participants with technical problems or missing equipment could identify and resolve challenges before the actual VSED seminar started.

Online Ramp-up: Given that the main elements of VSED needed to be transformed to videoconferences, the committee discussed that there might be a need to reduce the duration because they anticipated that videoconference participation could be more demanding and fatiguing than on-site participation. The committee then debated whether asynchronous online interactions could possibly contribute to the VSED and make up for the somewhat shortened synchronous sessions. The advantage of asynchronous interactions was also seen as the flexibility in time and space, which was considered to be a good fit at the beginning of the pandemic when both students and faculty were facing additional demands. This led to the idea of adding a two-week asynchronous pre-event phase in the LMS as a "soft start". This pre-event phase was intended as a time and space for students and faculty to meet their peers, get familiar with the new, asynchronous online learning environment, and enjoy the flexibility in their participation in the Online Ramp-up (available 24/7). The committee also figured that the Online Ramp-Up could be used for organizational purposes such as communicating the links to the online sessions, last-minute changes, and so on. At first, the committee intended to conduct all the organizational messaging via e-mail but realized during their discussions that given the scale of the event (160 participants), e-mail could be problematic as many mail servers do not allow for this quantity of e-mails. Normally, to avoid being tagged as spam, they need to be sent out in a staggered fashion which again would increase the work load on the steering committee.

Online-Wrap-Up: The wrap-up of the on-site SED involved the sharing of presentations, distribution of paper handouts, the creation of a movie from photos of the event, and the distribution of paper evaluation sheets. The committee was thus faced with the question of how to create a space and time frame to share learning resources or contact information, evaluate the seminar, ask follow-up questions and so on, at VSED. Following the idea of the Online-Ramp-up, the idea of the Online-Wrap was developed: A two-week asynchronous post-event in the LMS as a "slow end" was deemed helpful to provide a communication space for post-event discussions.

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[1] *Apéro* as a name refers to the Swiss tradition of a social gathering to share a drink or light snack together before the main event (a conference, a festival) starts.

ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
Apéro - Informal Test Session	Informal social gathering for testing the videoconference system
Online Ramp-up	Soft start for to all participants to get to know each other and the asynchronous learning environment
Online-Wrap-up	Slow end for sharing presentations, answering last emerged questions and an anonymous seminar evaluation
Closing Session	Summarizing, awarding of the debate prize and closure

TABLE 2. Overview of the three seminar new design elements.

In addition, the committee discussed the question of evaluation. Paper-based evaluations forms that were used at the SED were not possible. At first, to reduce the complexity of this design challenge under high pressure the committee considered just dropping the evaluation because in most partner universities there existed no formal requirement to provide evaluation possibilities to students. However, once the committee decided to include the Online Wrap-up phase, it was decided that an anonymous evaluation form could be provided via the LMS without much additional effort or resources.

Organizational level

Team Bar: When analyzing what else needed to be transformed from the on-site design of SED to the VSED, the steering committee also realized that faculty debriefing sessions needed to be included. During the on-site SED, faculty debriefing happens informally during meals or leisure activities. For VSED, the committee felt the need to schedule debriefing sessions and to arrange them formally because in the new environment, last-minute changes could be required and faculty perceptions could help fine-tune the online seminar on the fly. A one-hour "Team Bar" was thus arranged every night at 8 p.m. in the videoconferencing system. In addition to the formal debriefing, the 'Team Bar' could also serve as an informal interaction space for network members. The committee viewed the 'Team Bar' as necessary to continue the formerly well-established collaborations among the network that are an important part of this European collaboration, but that had been disrupted due to the pandemic.

Scaffolds and Support

Given the COVID-19 situation and the challenges and uncertainty faced by both students and faculty, different scaffolds and supports that could be built into the overall learning design were discussed. One idea that was developed and quickly supported by all members of the committee was to use, as a key scaffold, an attitude of empathy and humor throughout the seminar. Such an approach was envisaged as key to mitigate the high levels of anxiety among students as well as faculty due to the pandemic-related upheavals in their lives, and it made sense to emphasize this from the very beginning of the seminar. The committee therefore decided to scrutinize all seminar elements and communications to identify areas where they could communicate this approach.

For example, during the welcome session on Day 1, the VSED "Basic Rule" was established (Figure 1), and humor both encouraged and practiced in the interactive polls during the session.

Poll 1 How do you feel about this online event?

(a) New to me - hope there is some help!

(b) Experienced - I can help you run the event!

(c) Not relevant - I am here!
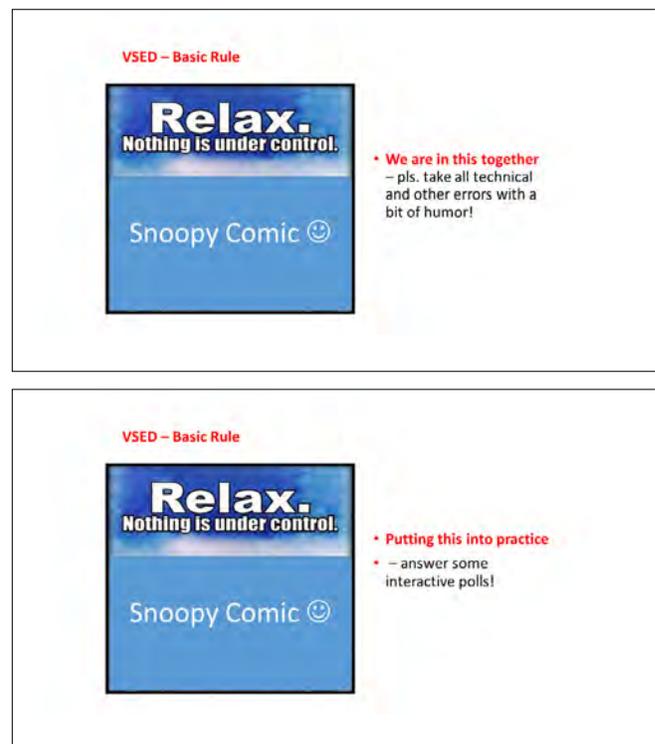
FIGURE 1. Presentation of the VSED "Basic Rule" with a comic strip and interactive polls

FIGURE 2. Personal Invitation Letter where FIRSTNAME was replaced by the first name of the respective participant, and that provided contact details of a support assistant.

Poll 2 Which delegation do you belong to?

Options (a)-(j): Name of ten delegations

(k) Why do you ask - I am a European!

Another example was the Apéro session. It was designed as an informal social gathering and technology test session, to be held during the Online-Ramp-up phase, a few days before the actual VSED started. This session seemed to be a perfect place to show an attitude of empathy and acknowledge the challenging learning circumstances for everybody due to the pandemic. To offer opportunities for more informal and individual interactions, the Apéro session was planned with 20-minute breakout sessions in randomly assigned groups. These were intended to provide all participants with the opportunity to make initial connections within small groups, to test technologies in a relaxed atmosphere, and to allow for more personal interactions given the group size of up to 160 participants.

Additionally, an appreciative, encouraging and warm tone was used for all communications. For example, the e-mail

FIGURE 3. Rules of Engagement—with an encouraging start, addressing the participants as pioneers (bullet point 1).

containing access instructions for the LMS was a personal invitation letter (Figure 2). It addressed each student individually with their name and also gave the name of a person for any further questions or support needed.

In addition, this design principle was deemed helpful to make participants feel supported in the midst of the tremendous uncertainty they faced, and to provide a positive experience given the constant flux of upsetting news regarding the pandemic. A second goal was to establish a feeling of pride ("by personal invitation only") in being part of a huge European solidarity event comprising 160 people from ten European countries and being pioneers in this first virtual event together, despite the global crisis. One example is provided in Figure 3, Rules of Engagement, that starts with an encouraging opening, addressing the participants as pioneers in an important shared mission.

Furthermore, the committee considered the invitation to the cultural evening as another important element that would emphasize the intended welcoming spirit of the seminar. Whereas in the former on-site SED the program just stated "cultural evening" and the evening relied on the on-site group dynamics between students and faculty from the different delegations, the committee decided to incorporate a descriptive invitation to the cultural evening into the digital program brochure (Figure 4).

As part of the intention to create a warm and welcoming VSED seminar space, the committee discussed various possibilities of creating a shared memory, for example the possibility of recording sessions, making them into a film together with screenshots and slides from presentations, and possibly using background music to make it more attractive. The strict GDPR and other data privacy regulations in place in European universities, however, posed significant challenges that made it almost impossible to record sessions. Recordings would have required permission from

FIGURE 4. The invitation to the cultural evening in the digital program booklet, with a detailed description of the goals and the possibilities for making an active contribution to the evening.

each participant for each recorded session—a procedure too cumbersome to implement given the number of participants. In addition, there was the concern that this would exert unjust pressure on students to comply with such a request because the seminar contributions of several students would later be graded by faculty. For these reasons, it was deemed legally safer to just take screenshots and to share them only within the seminar group in the learning management system. Screenshots also required individual permission from the each of the participants, if shared beyond the seminar group. Nevertheless, the committee decided to create a video to be shared only internally during the closing session on Day 3, comprising screenshots from various synchronous sessions along with music, to facilitate VSED identity-building and serve as seminar documentation for all who participated. This video cannot be shared in this article due to data privacy concerns as well as possible copyright infringements of the used music in case of publication.

Time and Flexibility

Unlike the on-site SED where all participants would have been in an old, secluded monastery for the four days, participants were working from home and/or dealing with family and other commitments while attending the VSED. Keeping this in mind, the steering committee intended to allow for different levels of engagement in the VSED. It tried to leverage the advantages of time and space in an online format, which were not possible in the SED, where students could only visit one student-led workshop and one expert talk because they all happened concurrently due to space and time limitations. The committee discussed offering five slots of expert talks, with only two talks occurring concurrently, so that students could attend up to five expert talks totally. In order to cater to very diverse student needs, and assuming that attendance via videoconferencing can be more fatiguing, it seemed best to declare attendance as optional. Students could attend a single expert talk or several, based on their availability and other commitments.

With the same reasoning, it seemed helpful to not run all ten student-led workshops (each with a duration of three hours) concurrently but to bundle them into clusters and offer workshop 1-5 in the morning and 6-10 in the afternoon so that students with a high level of engagement or sufficient time could attend two topical workshops.

Reconsidering seminar attendance in a virtual environment, the VSED committee decided to publicize the seminar anew. This was considered another way to leverage the affordances of a virtual seminar as students who had not intended to participate on-site due to financial constraints or other obligations could now do so online.

Selecting Technologies

The choice of technologies used for VSED was extremely challenging. The committee had decided on a mix of asynchronous and synchronous communication tools. Technologies were needed that came with an institutional license, respected European privacy laws (GDPR), provided access for a total of 160 participants from ten different universities, had an English interface, enabled easy registration processes, and provided a good user experience. All the universities in the network had their own set of learning technologies (e.g., learning management systems, videoconferencing systems) as well as their own set of regulations for protecting students' and lecturers' data privacy. For example, Google classroom was initially discussed as an option for synchronous communication because the Romanian member in the network had an institutional license, but other universities (e.g., Munich University of Applied Science) ban the use of Google classroom due to problems with data privacy. Furthermore, each university has its own LMS, but it was difficult to extend the LMS use to more than 100 external users. The initial plan was to use a German platform for online conferences that was known for its outstanding high standards of data privacy. However, when the steering committee started testing it, they found it cumbersome

Virtual Social Europe Days 2020

Challenges for Social Policy, Social Work and Human Resource Management

Time zone: Brussels

ELEMENT	TIME	TECHNOLOGY	DESCRIPTION
Online Ramp-Up	April, 27 - May, 10 - two weeks –	OLAT	Announcements, sharing files, getting to know each other in forums
Welcome Session	May, 11 10—12.30	ZOOM	10-11: Warm welcome, introducing the delegations & the program, with short Breakout Rooms for Workshop Groups 11-12: Keynote "Challenges for the European Union in a time of Crisis & Uncertainty" 12-12.30: Kick-Off "House of Commons Debate" on "European Solidarity in Times of Covid-19"
Debate Competition	May 11, 12.30 noon to May 13, 12.30 noon	OLAT	Students join the debate in a written format Incentive: Best Debater Award (Certificate & Book Voucher
Expert Talks I	May 11, 15-18.00	ZOOM	5 different expert talks (1h each) students can choose freely and spontaneously which lecture they want to attend
Student-Led Topical Workshops	May, 12 10-13.00 workshops 1-5 14-17.00 workshops 6-10	ZOOM	Topical Online Workshops, 1-10, see workshop program below Each workshop session lasts 3 h, students inscribed to the workshop present the national perspective on the topic in a presentation to the other student delegations, comparison of delegations' perspectives and discussion, facilitated by the lecturers
Cultural Evening	May, 12, 20 22.30 "Tell us your story"	ZOOM	Social hangout, share your story, sing a song, read a poem, ask questions, meet new friends
Expert Talks II	May, 13, 9-12.00	ZOOM	5 different expert talks (1h each) students can choose freely and spontaneously which lecture they want to attend
Closing Session	May, 13, 15-17.00	ZOOM	15-16.00 Commentary on Debate and Prize Awarding 16-17.00 Closure & Farewell
Online Wrap-Up	May 14—May 31 - two weeks –	OLAT	Share files, links, last Q& A, Evaluation

TABLE 3. Overview of the final design of VSED with asynchronous and synchronous elements, offering different levels of engagement and participation. Color legend: orange Key VSED Event, yellow optional expert talks, synchronous with ZOOM, grey asynchronous written exchange on OLAT .

WORKSHOP #	TOPIC
1	Superdiversity and social cohesion
2	Poverty and social exclusion in Europe
3	More people at work
4	Work and employment between minimum wages and social assistance
5	Recruitment and selection
6	Digital economy and society
7	The future of work
8	Healthy aging
9	The gender pay gap—myth or real
10	Social work and climate—people, profit, planet

TABLE 4. Overview of VSED topics of the 10 student-led workshops.

to register themselves due to the German-only interface. The workaround that was tried, an English translation of the registration form in PDF format, did not appear to work smoothly for registration. Acknowledging that the first user experience with any online tool influences its final acceptance by users, and assuming that this would impact conference participation, the committee opted against this platform and searched further for a suitable LMS. Finally, the LMS 'OLAT' hosted by the Virtual Campus Rhineland Palatia, and connected to the Munich University of Applied Sciences was chosen for asynchronous interactions, because it was possible to create 140 external user accounts easily and it has an English user interface. For synchronous interactions, institutional licenses of the video conferencing software Zoom belonging to Malta University and Munich University of Applied Sciences were chosen because institutional licenses of Zoom by European universities are GDPR–compliant and ensure data privacy. Moreover, two members of the committee were already familiar with Zoom and could vouch for its good usability and user experience.

DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the design discussions outlined above, the committee came up with the following final seminar design (shown in Table 3, next page). It comprised two weeks of online asynchronous activities (the Online Ramp-Up), three days of virtual synchronous activities (some of which were optional, such as the expert talks), and two weeks of online asynchronous activities (the Online Wrap-Up). Based on the decisions that had been taken on omitting, transforming, or adding elements from the on-site SED outlined earlier in this article, the final elements of VSED were reviewed in detail and adapted to learning and teaching in an online learning

FIGURE 5. Virtual Acknowledgements for speakers giving expert talks at VSED.

environment. Fundamental design principles that had been agreed upon, such as flexibility, empathy, and humor, served as key design principles during this process.

Seminar topics: At the beginning of the design process, the steering committee discussed to what degree the content of the seminar should be adapted to the pandemic. Consensus was quickly reached that adaptations to the current crisis would be needed in the welcoming session as part of the overall orientation and defining activity to establish common ground. However, the committee decided against adapting the focus of the seminar to the pandemic because the overall seminar content was deemed to be of continued relevance. For example, the ten topics for the *Student-led topical workshops* were not changed because they covered all relevant aspects of a Social Europe and remained relevant during the pandemic, such as Workshop 6 "Digital Economy and Society" (Table 4).

In contrast, for the *Expert talks,* the committee reckoned that the content should reflect the current pandemic situation as it impacted European social policy. The suggestion here was

to complement the previously decided talks on standard European social policy issues with current issues during the pandemic (e.g., Legal issues of the Covid-19 pandemic: Restrictions of civil liberties, prioritizing patients, solidarity duties between member states of the EU). Given the decision to increase the total number of talks, this seemed easily doable, and the expert talks were planned as one-hour sessions, including presentation and discussion. As soon as these decisions had been taken, the committee reached out to all faculty in the network to ask for contributions to the expert talks (from within the network or by contacting external experts). It was decided that a Zoom testing session and technical support should be provided to all the speakers. We also discussed how we could acknowledge speakers' engagement at VSED (at SED external speakers usually received small presents in the form of university merchandise). Sending real presents via regular postal service was challenging during the pandemic, therefore we decided to acknowledge speakers with virtual flowers or sweets (as shown in Figure 5). In addition, especially for speakers at an early stage in their academic career, the committee also proposed and eventually implemented a speaker certificate.

The *Welcome session* also needed to be adapted to the online format. It traditionally entails a keynote speech by an expert on European social policy. To acknowledge the pandemic at the start of the event, the committee suggested that the keynote topic should reflect the pandemic situation. The topic for the keynote was thus defined as "Challenges for the European Union in a Time of Crisis & Uncertainty". Additionally, in order to facilitate interactions in the ten student-led topical workshops on Day 2, a synchronous 20-minute *getting to know each other activity* was included in Breakout Rooms.
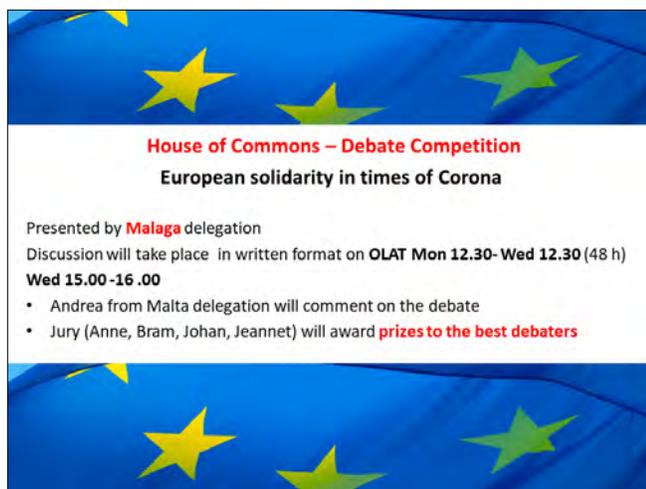
FIGURE 6. Screenshot of the announcement for the debate competition, with information on which national delegation kicks-off the debate, the time frame for asynchronous written participation, and names of faculty acting as commentators or jury members.

The debate competition was split into two parts - the kick-off was integrated into the end of the welcome session on the first day, and was kept open for 48 hours when students could participate in an asynchronous discussion forum on the LMS, OLAT. The prize-giving and celebration of winners were integrated into the closing session, using strong visuals and music (Figure 6).

EXPERIENCE OF THE DESIGN

Overall, the VSED design appeared to fulfill the seminar goals of providing a learning opportunity across European borders that at the same time acknowledged the special situation created by the pandemic and the newness of virtual interactions for many participants. Various sources were used to provide insight into the experiences of students and faculty during the first VSED design, including the anonymous student survey (n=55) in the LMS OLAT, written communications of all participants in the LMS OLAT, and a faculty debrief session after the seminar. Comments from the evaluations included in this section have been reproduced without making any changes to language errors.

Student Perspectives

In the student evaluation that used a 5 point Likert Scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), 80% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "All in all, the online event Virtual Social Europe Days was a success." This suggests that the overall student experience of the design was a positive one. In addition, students' open-ended responses were largely appreciative of the seminar design and the learning opportunity. For example, students commented, "Despite the circumstances, everything went well and everything was well organized, so thank you for that" and, "The Sociale Europe days didn't feel like something we 'had' to do for school because it felt really like 'home', as if everyone already knew each other. My knowledge is certainly enriched while I was having fun!" Students also expressed pride at being part of the seminar, and surprise at the warmth of the experience within the online environment: One student stated: "Thank you for the effort. I really felt I was in a real conference and not in my room. That was really nice and warm." This statement indicates that the goal of creating a welcoming and encouraging learning atmosphere was reached. Another reflected, "Also I really liked this feeling of togetherness—I've never expected, that this could exist in an online version. But it existed in such a strong way!!!!" This student's user experience clearly indicates that bonding amongst peers did happen online for him/her. Another student's statement suggests that, to a large extent, the learning design achieved the committee's goal of providing clear guidelines for all the learning activities planned - "During the Social Europe Days I did not encounter any problems or ambiguities. I found the guidelines very clear. Everything went as agreed via the script. It's a good

thing that such a clear roadmap was made. It was nice to get in touch with other students from the same disciplines".

However, not surprisingly, there was diversity in students' reactions towards the design. The following student statement shows that the interaction and bonding element was impacted despite the efforts of the design team:

"I think it's a bit sad that everything had to be online. This way the social part of the whole week disappeared a little, I don't really feel like I got to know any new people. I know it's no one's fault tho, and considering the situation the only options were online or no Social Europe Days. So you made the best out of it, thank you!"

Faculty Experience

During the debriefing sessions, faculty expressed great satisfaction with the overall design and implementation of the VSED, but they also expressed great exhaustion. Managing so many different digital technologies that were new to many, and spending several hours online in front of a computer screen seemed much more exhausting to them than regular on-site teaching. At the same time, unanimously, faculty agreed that the online format made it possible to realize the seminar goals to a much larger extent than was supposed previously. Especially the quality of the online interactions with students and among faculty exceeded their expectations. Faculty also felt proud of having made the transition to the digital realm instead of cancelling yet another event as was the case with many other academic events, conferences, and seminars, and of being among the pioneers for large-scale online international collaboration.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE DESIGN TEAM

Our reflections and lessons learned draw on the student evaluations, faculty debriefing sessions and the lead authors' notes from the VSED. This section is organized according to the categories used to describe the design choices and decisions - transforming the existing design, inserting new elements, scaffolds and support; time and flexibility, and selecting technologies.

Transforming the Existing Design

The two-step procedure of first reviewing the existing elements of the on-site design and analyzing whether they should be omitted, retained, or transformed, and then deciding whether new elements were needed, was found to be efficient and worthwhile. It allowed the steering committee to "dive" into the original design purpose and make informed choices. In addition, it made the task at hand, that initially felt somewhat daunting, easier to deal with. Furthermore, the three-category initial assessment of whether the retained elements would be easy, feasible, or demanding to transform to the online format also helped to take one decision at a time and prevented the committee from being overwhelmed by the tight timeline. The final decisions taken were found to be largely adequate for reaching seminar goals. For example, the debate competition turned out to be more demanding to convert to the online format. In contrast, the "getting to know each other" activities appeared less difficult to adapt to the online format than initially thought. The synchronous and asynchronous elements designed for this sub-goal of getting to know each other can also be recommended as transferable to a similar context.

Inserting New Elements

Overall, the four new elements (the Apéro, the asynchronous Online-Ramp-Up, the Team Bar/Faculty Debriefing Sessions, and the asynchronous Online Wrap-Up) largely served their purpose. The Apéro was unanimously experienced as very helpful as an easy, low-threshold introduction ("meeting Europe citizens") to the seminar, to other participants, and to the technologies that would be used.

The Faculty Debriefing Sessions (Team Bar) were also perceived as necessary and supportive of the overall process of implementing the learning design of VSED. Without the scheduled videoconferences for faculty debriefing, any exchange of perceptions, experiences, and last tasks to be distributed could only have been achieved through cumbersome group e-mails because the only common technology used by the international group of 20 faculty members from ten different European universities is e-mail.

The two asynchronous phases before and after the 3-day seminar were valued and fulfilled their intended purpose in some aspects, less so in others. For example, participant communication and asynchronous interactions were a lot less intensive in both phases than originally planned for and hoped. This might have been caused by the selected technology that was a university LMS, but it appeared that the time constraints experienced by all the participants (faculty and students) during the pandemic did not allow for a lot of "extra" communication before and after the main VSED event.

Reflecting on the formal and informal learning opportunities during the VSED, the committee saw some room for improvement in hindsight. More informal elements could have been included in the learning design. The Apero, the cultural evening, and the "getting to know each other" activities in the Online-Ramp up and in the Welcome Session worked well as informal learning opportunities. They were perceived as extremely important for the overall learning goal of exploring one's European identity, understanding pressing European challenges, and experiencing a sense of European cohesion. However, they did not seem to have been able to fully compensate for the plentitude of informal learning opportunities and personal connections at the traditional on-site SED. It is possible that an entirely unstructured virtual synchronous space (e.g., called "Cafeteria") with a drop-in functionality could have filled this gap.

With respect to content, there was a wide variety of talks, but each expert talk could possibly have benefited from the addition of an extra 30 minutes reserved for students' questions and discussion. Speakers were naturally inclined to extend their talks, especially in the digital environment, so there was little time for questions and discussions.

Scaffolds and Support

The scaffolds provided in all areas of the design, in the form of empathy, humor, and error tolerance, were found to be crucial for the overall success of the learning design of VSED. Student responses to the open-ended evaluation items indicated that the general approach of appreciative and empathetic communication impacted many students' user experiences as intended. Despite the difficult environment of the pandemic, "warmth", "connections", "real encounters," enjoyment", and "a fun way of learning" were some examples of the positivity that characterized many student survey responses and also the e-mail communications between faculty and students. Strong visuals and music used in the videoconferences also appeared to have contributed to the intended agreeable user experience. The provision of clear contact persons for support, with phone and e-mail information was found to be extremely important when the selected technologies did not work as planned.

Time and Flexibility

The decisions taken about time and flexibility appeared to have been appropriate for the VSED learning goals. Providing options to the different national delegations for their attendance of expert talks worked well. It allowed for diversity in a true European sense and offered participants a variety of access points to tackle the many facets of a "Social Europe". The expert talks were generally well attended, but with differing levels of participation at each talk (30 to 80 participants).

Some participants who would not have been able to attend the on-site SED were able to benefit from the online format and attend the VSED. They expressed their appreciation at the unexpected chance to experience "virtual European mobility" during their studies. Notwithstanding the positive experience, many participants found it stressful and exhausting to spend so many hours in front of a computer screen. Thus, in hindsight, spreading the seminar out over four days similar to the on-site SED, but allowing for more breaks between elements and sessions, and maybe increasing the number of informal learning opportunities would have been the better choice. Also, the student-led topical workshops by the different delegations could have then been prolonged with more time for discussion and breaks as the presentations and discussion by video conferencing was perceived by both students and faculty to take more time. Additionally, clearer instructions and maybe stricter facilitation could have

made the expert talks more interactive and allowed for more discussion and questions.

Selecting Technologies

The combination of online synchronous sessions in Zoom and asynchronous technologies (the LMS OLAT) proved to be an appropriate mix. Both the technology choices that were made incurred few demands for technical support and quick access was provided to the person responsible for such support. At the same time, participants used the LMS OLAT minimally, which, according to the steering committee, corresponded to their experiences with all official, GDPR-compliant universities' LMS that are used by students only if necessary. Students' day-to-day communication tools like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, etc. provide far easier communication and are used more often. It is also possible that students did not find the time to engage in the LMS due to their other commitments and the challenging circumstances of the pandemic. The committee reflected that a different structure in the online discussion forums that is more conducive to dialogue might work better next time rather than traditional forums organized by topics.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we described the process of designing 'Virtual Social Europe Days', an online adaptation from the on-site 'Social Europe Days - Challenges for Social Work, Social Policy and Human Resource Management' that aimed to create European solidarity and a sense of European identity. The systematic approach to design—reviewing the various elements and taking decisions on what to omit, retain, or add, along with the constant acknowledgement of the pandemic backdrop that led to the inclusion of empathy, humor, and flexibility for participants - contributed to the overall assessment that the resulting learning design of VSED helped achieve the intended seminar goals. These parts of the design approach could also be useful to others attempting to design virtual events during COVID-19, especially with a tight timeline.

This case also included unique challenges. A team of collaborators from ten universities attempted to create a positive learning experiences for 140 students, and were courageous enough to create a new steering committee six weeks ahead of the event. The ten universities were from eight countries with multiple policies in place for data privacy and technology use that had to be taken into account in a technology-based learning environment. Nevertheless, the goals of "learning across borders" and learning about European social policy issues were both successfully achieved by combining asynchronous and synchronous technologies, adapting existing elements, and adding new elements to the seminar design.

Virtual learning environments tend to be highly structured, especially when faculty who are used to formal online teaching experiences are at the helm of the design. Despite the efforts of the steering committee to include informal learning activities (such as 'getting to know each other' exercises, a cultural evening), the forging of connections, leisure time together, and general socializing in the evenings that characterized the on-site seminar could not be replicated entirely in the online environment. A major lesson learned was that additional avenues and activities for informal learning and socializing need to be explored in the online environment, such as unstructured "cafeteria/bar" open spaces or "social hangouts" to foster connections among participants.

The successful implementation of the VSED also resulted in faculty reflecting on the possibility of retaining a few of the elements and experiences from the online design for future SED offerings. Given the pandemic, we do not know whether it will be possible to conduct the on-site SED near Brussels in 2021. The SED/VSED network is discussing the possibility of a hybrid design of the Social Europe Days with a combination of on-site elements and online activities, which would be yet another design case.

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