

# “I felt a bit nervous”: Virtual Exchange as an emotional journey

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*Virtual Exchange is a collective term for a set of collaborative online learning practices that cut across institutional, cultural, and international borders. Moving outside their learning environments, the participants engage in project work with foreign peers. The teams have to work across time zones, use foreign languages, manage cultural differences and apply digital tools for communication and collaboration. The virtual projects enhance the development of transversal work/life skills, which are an asset in today’s global labour market. The aim of the present study is to explore the emotional trajectory of Virtual Exchange based on the students’ e-portfolios. By analysing the self-evaluations, we can get a better understanding of the emotional experience of participating in Virtual Exchange and use the findings to develop the pedagogical facilitation of such projects. The research questions address the emotions that the students described when they were reporting on their learning experiences and the individual emotional trajectories that emerge in the students’ reports. Data was collected in the form of e-portfolios that the student participants submitted at the end of a Finnish-Polish Virtual Exchange project in 2019. The “Combining Expertise from Linguistics and Tourism: A Tale of Two Cities Told in Videos” collaboration had promotional discourse in tourism as its main theme. The participants (N=25) were university students majoring in tourism (Poland) and in foreign language studies (Finland). The e-portfolios were analysed with the help of dialogical approach combined with discourse analytical insights (Sullivan, 2012).*

**Keywords:** Virtual Exchange, emotions, virtual team, collaborative online intercultural learning

## 1 Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a form of internationalization at home, which enables online intercultural collaboration among students across geographical distances (O’Dowd, 2018). Although VE is not a common practice yet in higher education, it is gaining more ground due to the increasing need for virtual internationalization and global employment skill development (Jager et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic also enhanced the need for employees who can efficiently communicate and collaborate in diverse, transnational virtual teams. Virtual Exchange projects offer an opportunity for the students to experience online intercultural teamwork in a guided, facilitated educational context.

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eISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: University of Jyväskylä, Language Campus

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<https://apples.journal.fi>

<https://doi.org/10.47862/apples.99891>

VE can take various forms, depending on the pedagogical design, the participants, and the learning outcomes (Helm & Acconica, 2019). The present study focuses on a Virtual Exchange that involved students from two countries and two disciplines in spring 2019. The collaborative project “Combining Expertise from Linguistics and Tourism: A Tale of Two Cities Told in Videos” was offered for Polish and Finnish university students. The Polish participants (n=13) were undergraduates majoring in Tourism (ICT or Management specialization), while the Finnish students (n=12) were pre-service foreign language teachers and language majors. The participants worked in mixed-nationality teams for six weeks, using English as *lingua franca*. The project theme was the promotional discourse of city tourism. The data comprises the e-portfolios that the students submitted at the end of the project.

The aim of the research is to explore the emotional trajectory of Virtual Exchange as manifested in the students’ e-portfolios. Previous studies have argued that online intercultural collaboration could be challenging for the students (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Helm, 2015; Müller-Hartman & Kurek, 2016; Helm 2018; Fondo & Jacobetty, 2020), but the students’ emotional trajectories have not been explored in detail. Fondo and Jacobetty’s (2020) study addresses this gap by examining foreign language anxiety (FLA) in Virtual Exchange. Their research applies quantitative methods and explores anxiety as a central emotion with the help of questionnaires. Although the findings provide important insights into the development of FLA, the authors admit the limitations of the quantitative study and call for more qualitative approaches.

Using a dialogical approach (Sullivan, 2012) and building on constructivism (Barrett, 2006; Botella & Gamiz 2012; Lindquist et al., 2015), the present study offers a qualitative analysis of the emotional dimension of Virtual Exchange. As Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) point out, with regard to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison et al., 2000), emotions underpin the online learning experience and contribute to the construction of social-emotional presence in the learning community. Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) suggest emotional presence be added to the three presences (cognitive, teaching, and social) of the CoI model (see also Rienties & River, 2014).

By exploring the emotional trajectories, we can get a better understanding of the range of emotions that the participants of VE go through. This knowledge can help educators and facilitators of VE to improve the pedagogical design of such projects in order to make them more rewarding and engaging for the participants.

## 2 Emotions

It is not an easy task to conceptualize emotions. To cluster the various theories in researching emotions in the context of education, Zembylas (2007) differentiates between psychodynamic, social-constructionist, and interactionist approaches.

Building on both biological and cognitivist views, psychodynamic studies (Keltner & Gross, 1999; Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Panksepp, 2011; Fontaine et al., 2013) understand emotions primarily as inner states, individual experiences, sensations, internal reactions that individuals have to certain events or happenings. The focus is on the physical, verbal and non-verbal reactions of the subjects because emotions are seen as the result of biological processes generated by anatomically-given neural structures (see Lindquist et al., 2015).

In contrast, social-constructionist approaches emphasize the socio-cultural context in which the emotions are expressed or interpreted and see emotions as cultural artefacts (Zembylas, 2007). As proposed by Averill (1980), who developed the social-constructionist theory of emotions (which was then labelled as social *constructivist*, see Averill, 1980), social beliefs and rules are the primary principles by which individuals identify and interpret their emotional states. From this perspective, emotions are seen as communicative experiences grounded in social contexts and constructed under learned but often tacit convictions or rules (Cornelius, 1996, as cited in Zembylas, 2007; Hufnagel & Kelly, 2018). The social-constructionist research of emotions is often built on qualitative, narrative, and interpretive methodologies (Zembylas, 2007).

Interactionist studies converge the psychodynamic and the social perspectives by interpreting emotions both as embodied and performative experiences (Zembylas, 2007). The focus is on the discursive and bodily fabrication (or performance) of the emotion as a lived experience. In addition, the role of power is also investigated with regard to its impact on the expression of emotions and concerning its reproduction through the enactment of emotions (Harding & Pribram 2004, as cited in Zembylas, 2007). The researchers combine the analysis of the biological, internal reactions with their sociocultural interpretations.

Although Zembylas (2007) acknowledges the importance of each of the three main theoretical approaches (psychodynamic, social-constructionist, and interactionist) in the study of emotions in education, he suggests moving beyond the categories by examining emotion discourses and performances from a post-structuralist perspective. In this framework, emotions are constructed and re-constructed in a dynamic process, at the intersection of the individual and the social, manifested in and interpreted through emotional discourses, practices, and performances (Zembylas, 2007).

This approach is in line with *constructivism*, which suggests that people are construing meaning of their life experiences by interpreting and organizing them through recurring patterns and themes (Kelly 1991, as cited in Botella & Gamiz, 2012). Self-narratives play an important role as cognitive-affective-behavioural structures that function as scaffolds for the interpretation and organization of life experiences (Botella & Gamiz, 2012). As pointed out by Mascalo et al. (1997, as cited in Botella & Gamiz, 2012), “the self-narrative ... emerges epigenetically from the co-action of multiple levels of systemic organisation, ranging from the bio-genetic, through the personal-agentive, to the dyadic relational and ultimately to the cultural-linguistic”. Barrett’s (2006) theorization of emotion confirms this by stating that the experience of emotion is an act of categorization, guided by embodied knowledge. The emotional experience is realised when an individual categorizes (i.e. labels) their internal state. Categorization thus means a conceptualization process (Barrett, 2006), which is individually contrived, and in which language plays an important role (Lindquist et al., 2015).

Neville (2013), in agreement with Damasio (1999, as cited in Neville, 2013), makes a distinction between a feeling and an emotion, saying that emotions are objectively detectable, while feelings are our subjective experiences of emotions. Emotions are formulated first via chemical and neural responses in the brain and become feelings when we subjectively identify, label and talk about them (Neville 2013). In the present study, the two terms (emotion and feeling) are used as synonyms, following the Conceptual Act Theory (CAT) proposed by Lindquist et al. (2015), which sees the expression of emotions via language as part of the

emotion construction process. When communicating, the individuals may identify, categorize and label their emotions by making selections from their own repertoire of semiotic resources. This process of emotional expression may be limited by the sociocultural emotional display norms (Prior, 2016; Hufnagel & Kelly, 2018) and one's emotional granularity (Barrett, 2006).

Emotional experiences reflect intentionality in the sense that they are about something or directed towards something (Mascolo, 2009). Hufnagel and Kelly (2018) state that expressed emotions are in response to a specific event or knowledge and therefore have *aboutness* (Hufnagel, 2015). According to Mascolo (2009), the descriptions of emotional experience are also possible as a form of reflective activity. Thus, although experience is immediate, descriptions of experience are reflective actions that require skill in the use of psychological terms through discourse.

Hufnagel and Kelly (2018) suggest that we use the term emotional expressions to describe emotions that are communicated through discourse. Emotional expressions form an important set of linguistic resources that can be used to communicate emotionality. Prior (2016, p. 33) uses the term emotion-indexing descriptions and categories to refer to a set of linguistic means by which emotionality can be communicated. These emotional expressions or emotion-indexing descriptions are identifiable in discourse, e.g. "I'm happy" or "I hate this", but, depending on the context and the interplay of other semiotic resources (e.g. facial expressions, tone of voice), the lexical meaning of the emotional expressions might not be a true indicator of the actual emotional state of a person. Therefore, researchers should always consider the expression of emotions in context.

### 3 Expression of emotions in e-portfolios

E-portfolios are often used as formative assessments in VE. As defined by Barrett (2010), an e-portfolio usually includes personal reflections and evidence of the student's learning journey in the form of extracts from their course or project work, for example written texts, photos, videos, teacher and/or peer feedback. E-portfolios may also be used in self and peer assessments and as shared platforms which allow for interaction with learning communities and other stakeholders of the learning process (Kunnari & Laurikainen, 2017; Laurikainen & Kunnari, 2018).

A central aspect of an electronic portfolio is the student's personal reflections on their learning experiences (Jisc, 2008; Barrett, 2010). The writer shares their feelings, thoughts and values about the chronicled events (Hubbs & Brand, 2010), which can enhance learning (Boud, 2001). Therefore, e-portfolios are ideal for tracking learning and making the acquired competencies, skills, and personal development visible. However, as Boud (2001) points out, the student's awareness of the target readers might inhibit the free expression of thoughts and emotions. Related to this, Prior (2016) calls attention to the process of emotion management, which can influence the discursive accounts of emotions in self-reports. People may intensify or minimize their own emotionality when expressing or describing their feelings to others. In the context of the learners' self-reflections, there is a chance that the students portray themselves by showing their best selves because they know that the teacher is going to read and assess their work (Boud, 2001). Therefore, as Prior (2016) points out, self-reports are not necessarily true accounts of the participants' feelings.

Confirming these doubts, Bieg et al. (2014) differentiate between trait and state emotions. Trait emotions are defined as semantic, conceptual, and decontextualized emotions described in retrospective self-reports, while state emotions are episodic, experiential, and contextual, expressed in real-time. The authors call attention to the fact that trait emotions are not always good indicators of one's actual emotional state because such assessments are influenced by the participants' subjective beliefs and memory biases. This can result in under- or overestimated emotions in retrospective self-reports (Bieg et al., 2014).

However, research has shown that the intent or the context of the self-evaluation may influence the consistency, accuracy, and honesty of the self-evaluation (Andrade, 2019). In formative assessments, when evaluation is linked to a learning objective rather than an outcome and focuses on the development rather than the end-product, the consistency and validity of the self-assessment is closely aligned with teacher evaluation (Bol et al, 2012; Chang et al., 2012, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012; Panadero & Romero, 2014, as all cited in Andrade, 2019). Therefore, even though the electronic portfolios may be subject to emotion management, subjective beliefs and memory biases, they can serve as consistent and valid forms of self-assessment because of their emphasis on one's self-development.

#### **4 Virtual Exchange as emotionally challenging**

Emotional trajectories of VE have received little attention in research, although the projects, due to their collaborative, intercultural, and digitally mediated nature, are often challenging for the participants (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Working in a virtual team may pose difficulties (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020) due to the limited or lack of opportunities for face-to-face meetings. As a result, it is harder to establish personal rapport and affective commitment among the group members (Johnson et al., 2009). At an individual level, members of virtual teams need to deal with the ambiguity of emotional authenticity, generated by physical and psychological distance (Connelly & Turel, 2016). In addition, most VE teams are newly formed and last for one project, so there is a lack of shared grounding in terms of mental models, conceptual frameworks and personal relationships (Cramton, 2001; Maynard & Gilson, 2014; Cundill et al., 2018).

Jokikokko and Uitto (2017) point out that intercultural learning itself may be demanding and cause discomfort. In VE, the students usually work in culturally diverse teams, often across different time zones. Intercultural teams that involve co-located participants may be subject to internal subgroup salience based on location and by sharing similar contexts and experiences (Cramton & Hinds, 2004). "Differences in physical context or locale can result in members having different information, assumptions, preferences and constraints," state Cramton and Hinds (2004, p. 238). Those from the same geographical area (e.g. a country) may have chances to meet face-to-face, experience the same exogenous events (such as national holidays, public transportation strikes, see Cramton & Hinds, 2004), develop stronger bonds and thus see themselves as a subgroup "us", separate from "them", i.e. others located at a distance. Unless there is intense information sharing among the team members and an attitude of mutual positive distinctiveness, there is a risk for ethnocentric views and tension to develop (Cramton & Hinds, 2004).

The dynamics of virtual group communication may also have an impact on the emotions that the participants experience and express in Virtual Exchange. For

example, in video-mediated meetings, those feeling more confident (e.g. due to their proficiency in the language used for communication) may dominate the conversation floor, which could intimidate the more introverted students (Háhn & Podlášková, 2018). Doing less than what is expected, i.e. minimal or minor contribution of some participants could irritate those who are more active. Since communication is online, the impact of the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) should also be considered when it comes to the expressions of emotions (Suler, 2004). In virtual environments, as suggested by Suler (2004), people may develop an emotional sense of being anonymous and thus express themselves in a less restrained way, especially in asynchronous interactions. ODE can be controlled in VE by the teachers, who act as mentors by providing students with examples or models of appropriate online interaction strategies (O'Dowd et al., 2019).

Virtual Exchange environments are digitally mediated transnational spaces, but ideologically they are not neutral (Helm, 2018). The digital tools and platforms are often shaped by cultural, linguistic and/or institutional ideologies and normative expectations to which the participants need to adjust (Hauck, 2020). Those lacking essential digital, linguistic, intercultural and social skills for online collaboration might feel marginalized as members of the online learning community (Helm, 2018; Satar & Akcan, 2018; Hauck, 2020; Satar & Hauck, 2020). The sites of Virtual Exchange might thus become sites of negotiation and even struggle in terms of identity representation and meaning-making (Helm, 2018), which can trigger a range of emotions.

Fondo and Jacobetty (2020) call attention to the affective challenge that the use of a foreign language might create in VE online interactions. The researchers investigated foreign language anxiety with the help of a 21-item online questionnaire created for VE participants. The findings show that in addition to linguistic and learning-related sources of anxiety (e.g. communication apprehension), new digital tools, and the arising technical problems in particular, led to student anxiety. By creating data clusters based on the reported anxiety levels, Fondo and Jacobetty (2020) also identified four student profiles: apprehensive communicators, anxious learners, technophobes, and confident communicators and learners. To reduce anxiety in VE, the authors recommend scaffolding the online interactions and making the students familiar with the digital tools.

Although VE functions as an ideal “sandpit” for experiencing and practicing intercultural online teamwork (Satar & Hauck, 2020), the challenges that participants may face need to be addressed in class (Helm, 2015). Several studies, such as Müller-Hartman and Kurek (2016), O'Dowd et al. (2019), Fondo and Jacobetty (2020), Háhn (2020), emphasize the importance of preparing the students for online intercultural encounters and for virtual teamwork in a foreign language. They recommend that the teachers take an active role in providing socio-emotional support throughout the project, for example, by presenting online interaction strategies before the exchange or by arranging follow-up class discussions on the critical incidents that the students experience.

## **5 Data and methods**

The aim of the study is to explore the emotional trajectory of Virtual Exchange qualitatively, based on the student participants' written reports. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) What emotions do the students describe when reporting on their learning experiences?
- 2) What types of individual emotional trajectories can be identified in the e-portfolios?

The data was collected in the form of e-portfolios (N=25) that the participants of a Polish-Finnish Virtual Exchange submitted. The teaching project was launched in the spring term of 2019 under the title “Combining expertise from linguistics and tourism: A Tale of Two Cities Told in Videos” (Háhn & Radke, 2020). The participants from Finland (n=12) were language majors: pre-service language teachers and language experts. The Polish students (n=13) were studying tourism through ICT or management specialization. The exchange lasted for six weeks. The pedagogical design was mentored by EVOLVE (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange), which run as an Erasmus+ funded KA3 project (2018-2020).

The schedule and the tasks of the Polish-Finnish VE are displayed in Table 1. In Poland, the project was part of an English for Tourism course, while in Finland the students registered specifically for this project. In both countries, the students had regular on-campus class meetings with their teacher and received ECTS credits for the completion.

**Table 1.** Schedule of the “Tale of Two Cities Told in Videos” VE.

Week	Main activities and tasks	
0	Preparation week: a short survey about the countries and the two cities (in local groups); self-introductions on Padlet	
1	Videoconference with all participants and the teachers	Task 1 (T1)
2	Independent study of the two cities’ English websites Sharing and comparing the findings in small groups Groups share reports of their work	Task 2 (T2)
3	Collecting materials (e.g. photos, videos) of city attractions Group reports shared	Task 3 (T3)
4	Producing a promotional video about the two cities Group reports shared	Task 4 (T4)
5	Virtual exhibition of the videos, feedback to peers Videoconference with all participants and the teachers	Task 5 (T5)

When the VE ended, the students submitted their e-portfolios to their own teacher in each country. Following this, the names and personal identifiers were removed and the e-portfolios were shared between the teachers. All the students had given their informed consent to the data collection, in accordance with the GDPR regulations. The e-portfolios were adapted versions of templates provided by EVOLVE (2020) and included open-ended questions addressing each of the five main tasks, for example, “How did Task X go? Did you encounter any problems? How did you solve them? How did you collaborate with your foreign partners? What do you think about the outcomes?”

The data analysis builds on a dialogical approach (Sullivan, 2012; Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2018; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020) but also integrates discourse analytical insights with regard to the linguistic formation of the emotional states and thus follows the track of constructivist approaches in the study of emotions.

The first analytical stage was the familiarization with the entire data set of e-portfolios (N=25) in order to identify the key emotional moments. As defined by Sullivan (2012), a “key moment” is “an utterance of significance”, a “unit of meaning”, which captures a significant aspect of the experience being studied. In the e-portfolios, key emotional moments were identified when the students referred to their emotional states either by direct lexical reference (e.g. “I was nervous”) or by indirect reference, through the description of their thoughts and actions in a situation. The length of key emotional moments was not predetermined: they could be from a sentence to a few paragraphs.

In the second analytical stage, the key emotional moments were arranged in the form of imaginary *intrapersonal* dialogues for each student, following the chronological order of the project’s five tasks (see an example in the Appendix). The intrapersonal dialogues were seen as narratives, stories forming around the lived emotional experiences (Zembylas, 2007; Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

As the third step, the key emotional moments were arranged in the form of imaginary *interpersonal* dialogues (Sullivan, 2012; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2020), allowing for the presentation and juxtaposition of various voices and emotional states. Dialogues were formed around each of the main tasks. However, since Tasks 2–4 (T2–4) were all built on small group collaboration, it proved to be more insightful to create thematically coded dialogues for these tasks based on the emerging themes. This resulted in four interpersonal dialogues in total: Project Opening (T1), Collaborating with the Other (T2–4), Group Interaction (T2–4), and Project Closing (T5).

The advantage of the dialogical approach is that it allows the researcher to obtain a bigger picture of the participants’ emotions, including the changes with regard to the experience studied, without losing the individual emotional trajectories (Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2018). Following the suggestion of Sullivan (2012), the data for both the intra- and the interpersonal dialogues is presented in the form of “sound bites”, i.e. the most important extracts that articulate the experience. This allows for the sharing of a broader data set and more points of view.

## 6 Findings

The findings are shared in two main sections. First, the results of the *intrapersonal* dialogues are discussed, which describe the types of individual emotional pathways identified. After this, the sound bites of the *interpersonal* dialogues are shown to give a comprehensive view of the emotional trajectory in Virtual Exchange.

### 6.1 Individual emotional trajectories

For the individual emotional trajectories, only those intrapersonal dialogues were considered (14 out of 25) that had emotional moments for at least three of the main tasks, including the first and the final task. Two main types of individual emotional pathways could be identified this way, each framing a different story of the Virtual Exchange experience. The first one was the emotional journey of personal growth, while the second was the narrative of getting through an assignment. Out of the 14 e-portfolios with intrapersonal dialogues, nine belonged to the first trajectory type and five to the second one. Examples of each emotional trajectory were found among both the Finnish (FIN) and the Polish (POL) participants (see Table 2).



**Table 2.** Distribution of the two main types of emotional trajectories.

	Portfolios	Total
<b>1 - Personal growth</b>	FIN-1, FIN-2, FIN-3, FIN-6, FIN-7, FIN-9 POL-3, POL-11, POL-12	9
<b>2 - Getting through</b>	FIN-5, FIN-10 POL-2, POL-4, POL-6	5
<b>Partial trajectories</b>	FIN-4, FIN-8, FIN-11, FIN-12 POL-1, POL-5, POL-7, POL-8, POL-9, POL-10, POL-13	11

Trajectory 1 is the path of personal growth, an intrapersonal dialogue describing a story of emotional change from initially negative emotions (such as nervousness and anxiety) to positive feelings of happiness and joy. The portfolios with this trajectory had a variety of emotions between the start and the end (for example, annoyance, satisfaction, frustration), but all share the sharp contrast between the initial and project-ending feelings. A further feature of this emotional path is framing the hardships as learning lessons. Here is an extract from the intrapersonal dialogue of a Finnish participant (FIN-2), with the emotional expressions typed in bold:

I was a **bit nervous** before the start of the Virtual Exchange program and especially the first video-conference because the entire project was to be completed online. (T1)

However, once the first video-conference started and we began introducing ourselves, I became **less nervous and felt more at ease**. I was also **more confident** in expressing myself in front of everyone. Before our first meeting as a group, I was **not anxious at all**. (T1)

I was **satisfied** with our meeting because we had quite a clear idea about what we were going to do and we had a fruitful discussion about the theme of our video. (T2)

... even if it feels a bit **awkward** in that moment - open discussion and honesty benefit the group in the long term as they create an atmosphere that allows for constructive criticism and freedom of expression (T2)

The production of the video was the most **challenging yet also the most enjoyable** part of the project. (T4)

I was **not really nervous** before the closing video-conference compared to the first one because I knew what to expect from the general structure of the conference. I felt **more comfortable** talking in front of everyone and expressing my opinions, and **I felt like my confidence had grown** during the virtual exchange. (T5)

In this type of emotional trajectory, there is an implication of personal growth in terms of overcoming the negative feelings and coping with the challenges in the interim stages of the VE. The use of the comparative adverbs “less” and “more” indicates this change in the expression “less nervous and felt more at ease” already with regard to Task 1. The challenges are framed as part of the learning experience. The student feels “a bit nervous” as the VE begins but reports on being “not really nervous” and “more comfortable” in the final task. There is explicit mention of feeling confidence growth on project completion.

The other type of emotional path identified in the data was that of getting through an assignment. The aspect of personal development and positive emotional change was not traceable in these written reports. As the project ended,

these students did not report on happiness and confidence growth; instead, they felt either nervous or frustrated and were relieved that the project was over. Compared to the first type of emotional trajectory, there is less or no comparison of the project initial and the closing emotional states. The emotional reflections are more isolated in this regard, addressing the completion of each task separately, in a more instrumental way, as shown in the example below (POL-4).

I was **a bit nervous** when I was asked to explain the reasons for choosing my field of study. I did not expect that, but the conversation was interesting. (T1)

This task show me how much more it should be done about the appearance and functioning of my city's website. This made me aware of the large gap between the level of the Poznan web site in comper to other european cities. For me as a student of Tourism and Recreation it was **very embarrassing**. (T2)

Partners from finland did not collect enough material for a given concept, so it was necessary to change the scenario. This came to light at the last minute, so there was little time to collect new materials. It was **a little stressful**, but we dealt with this problem very well. (T4)

I was expecting a summary of the results of our work, a short conversation about each of the films, what went well and what did not. I was **a little nervous**, because the teachers were asking about personal approach to the project, experience, feelings etc. and it is difficult for me to talk about my own feelings, especially in another language. (T5)

In the example above, a clear uplifting and emotionally rewarding path cannot be identified. The student completes the tasks, describing mostly negative feelings, but there is no explicit mention of personal development or confidence growth. In the “getting through” e-portfolios, the initial and the closing emotional moments are not discursively connected: there is no backward reference or comparison to previous feelings. Instead, each task is seen as an isolated challenge or struggle that the student had to cope with, which does not result in framing the VE as emotionally transformative learning.

In both types of pathways, a discursive counterbalancing of the negative feelings can be observed. The students used contrastive discourse markers to offset the reported nervousness, stress or frustration, e.g. “challenging *yet* also the most enjoyable”, “a little stressful, *but...*”, which could be seen as a form of emotion management.

## 6.2 The emotional trajectory of VE

In what follows, the general emotional trajectory of Virtual Exchange will be described, taking all e-portfolios (N=25) into account. Four interpersonal dialogues will be presented: Project Opening (T1), Collaborating with the Other (T2-4), Group Interaction (T2-4), and Project Closing (T5).

### 6.2.1 Project Opening (Task 1)

At the start of the Virtual Exchange, the students had to participate in a Zoom videoconference, which was organized for all participants, including the two teachers. The dialogue below displays extracts in the form of selected sound bites with regard to this task (emotional expressions in bold).

- FIN-1 It was **quite exciting** to see everyone, but, especially before the video-conference, I was **quite nervous**. I had never used video communication tools and I was afraid that I would not know how or that my headphones or my microphone would not work. (...) I was also **nervous about** what I should say to introduce me and whether others were able to understand me. (T1)
- POL-1 For me, the first task was the most difficult and **stressful**. It resulted from fact that I am a bit shy and until then I did not have too much opportunities to talk in English. (T1)
- FIN-10 The opening video conference was **a bit awkward** since all of us were new to it and we, or at least I, were not sure who are the people we are going to work with. I felt **a bit nervous** as well but **nothing more than anything excited**. (T1)
- POL-10 Before the video meeting, I was **a little worried** because of my knowledge of English. The atmosphere was very friendly. (T1)
- FIN-3 When the project started with the conference and first call, I felt **pretty relaxed**, because the workload did not seem to be too much. It was **nice** to see all the new people and their ideas and expectations for the project. (T1)
- POL-6 Before video meeting I was **very nervous** because I use video tools rarely, unless sometimes with my family. But after few minutes it was **possible to feel more comfortable**. (T1)
- FIN-2 ... once the first video-conference started and we began introducing ourselves, I became **less nervous and felt more at ease**. I was also **more confident** in expressing myself in front of everyone. (T1)
- POL-4 I was **a bit nervous** when I was asked to explain the reasons for choosing my field of study. I did not expect that, but the conversation was interesting. (T1)
- POL-12 First video-meeting was hard for me because I was **very stressed** but thanks to our teachers video-meeting was a **happy** experience. I learned that I must be brave and try to use the english language because thanks to that I can succeed. (T1)
- POL-7 During the video conference itself, I was **happy** how it went. (T1)

The imaginary dialogue around the project start illustrates the spectrum of feelings that the students had before and during the first video meeting. The most frequently reported initial emotions were nervousness, stress, and fear. The novelty of the experience (meeting foreigners in a videoconference) made the start intimidating and even awkward for many. In addition to the technology-related stress and the fear of the unknown, the Polish students also expressed worries about their English skills (e.g. POL-1, POL-10).

However, in several e-portfolios, the negative emotions combined with excitement, resulting in statements about mixed (positive and negative) emotions. A temporality of negative emotions can also be noticed: once the videoconference started, the stress usually disappeared, and the students felt more comfortable (e.g. POL-6, FIN-2, POL-4, POL-12, POL-7). Thus, the first video meeting, which was facilitated by the teachers, worked like an icebreaker in many cases. Emotional states of happiness, calmness, and even confidence growth were reported by both the Finnish and the Polish participants.

It is interesting to notice the use of hedging devices (e.g. "quite", "a bit") before the emotional expressions. One reason for this could be the students' lack of English vocabulary to express small differences in feelings. Another reason could

be their intention to soften the described negative feelings in a report, which would be read by the teacher.

### 6.2.2. Group Collaboration (Tasks 2 –4)

After the project opening, the students started working in international groups of 4 –6. They had to arrange video meetings to discuss each task, which included the comparison of the municipality websites (T2), collecting material for the final product (T3), and producing a promotional video of the two cities (T4). The groups had to share reports at the end of each task with the teachers and with the other groups. Two imaginary dialogues emerged during the completion of the collaborative tasks: Collaboration with the Other and Group Interaction.

Students often voiced feelings of stress and dissatisfaction with reference to collaborating with peers from another country. In these statements, the “others” were labelled with terms of nationality, e.g. “the Polish side”, “the Finns”, “my Finnish peer”, or with third person plural pronoun “they” but not with personal names. The interpersonal dialogue below illustrates an imaginary conversation among the participants on collaborating with their foreign peers.

- POL-12 The second task was the most difficult of the whole project. Cooperation with the Finns was difficult because I did **not feel the involvement** of new friends. (T2)
- FIN-1 Our collaboration went smoothly except for the meeting times: A Polish member suggested the time for a virtual group meeting and we Finns were there ready to start the conversation on time ... After all we were able to start almost 1,5 hours later than the agreed time. **It was not nice to have to wait for that long before we could start** (T2)
- POL-6 In fact of that we did this task for last moment and it could cause **stress. It was hard part of our project because I felt that Polish site had to do almost everything** - find theme to promotional movie and create a report. It is not possible to organise other people work especially from other culture and people who sometimes do not show their full commitment. But despite of that we created a great report. (T3)
- FIN-9 ... when we shared our results with the Polish side, it was **a bit frustrating**. Again, the Polish side was late from the agreed time. The Polish side had not done the analysis as thoroughly as we had so they agreed on our findings but did not have that much to add. (...) **I stayed calm and thanked for the effort even in my mind I felt slight irritation** (T2)
- Our polish friends were active and co-operative during this whole course and it made things easier. I was **pleased** with our task completion. (T3)
- POL-4 Partners from finland did not collect enough material for a given concept, so it was necessary to change the scenario. This came to light at the last minute, so there was little time to collect new materials. It was **a little stressful**, but we dealt with this problem very well. (T4)
- POL-3 After all I was **very happy** of the final results of a promotional video. (T4)
- FIN-10 Overall **I am happy** with how our presentation ended up looking and how much information and comparisons all of us found combined. (T2)

The dialogue is interwoven with many negative emotions such as frustration, annoyance, awkwardness, and stress regarding collaboration with foreign peers.

Some of the Finns (FIN-1, FIN-9) felt annoyed when the Polish students did not show up on time and submitted contributions just before the deadline in Task 2. It is interesting how a Finnish student (FIN-9) describes hiding their irritation by pretending to be calm in the video meeting. Some of the Polish students (POL-12, POL-6, POL-4) did not feel the commitment of their Finnish peers because, in their view, the Finns were not contributing enough and, as a result, it was the Poles who had to do everything. An “us-versus-them” perception can be detected in the use of terms such as “we Finns” (FIN-1), “the Polish side” (FIN-9, POL-6), or “the Finns” (POL-12).

Most of the negative emotions about collaboration with the foreign peers are expressed by de-owning and objectifying the feelings with the help of the pronoun “it” in subject position, e.g. “it was a bit stressful” (POL-4) or “it was a bit frustrating” (FIN-9). In contrast, the positive emotions, which were usually related to the activeness of the team members and the outcome of joint work, were owned by the students, using the first person in subject position, e.g. “I was pleased” (FIN-9), “I was very happy” (POL-3).

Another theme that emerged during the collaborative stages was group interaction, in particular with regard to synchronous meetings. The Finnish students were fluent in English, while the Polish students were at an intermediate (B2) level; thus, there was a proficiency level gap between the two groups. Both sides reported on feeling a bit awkward and frustrated due to this, especially in video conversations, when silences occurred, probably as an interplay of technical problems and differences in communication and language proficiency levels.

- POL-9 ... the video conference with our partners was **awkward**. The Finnish student were only saying cool, and okay. Me and my Polish partner tried to make contact but it was really hard for them to ever smile. (T1)
- Second video conference was still **awkward** but less then the first one. We tried to laugh together and we were making plans on doing next task. Even Finnish students open up about how they spent last weekend. (T2)
- FIN-3 They also mentioned few times during the course that they are not so proficient in English, **so** it was understandable but **a bit frustrating** for us. (T4)
- FIN-10 When we had our call, it got **a bit awkward at times**. I had the feeling that our Polish group mates did not understand what me and my Finnish peer were saying. We had **awkward silences** few times and I just had the feeling that they did not fully understand what I was saying based on their answers. **I did not feel like asking them whether they understood since I feel like it would make them feel bad about their English.** (T3)
- POL-13 The most **challenging** was trying to make Finnish speak in our conversations. (T2)
- FIN-2 In addition, there were again some technological difficulties that in combination with language barriers created “**awkward silences**”. (T2)
- POL-12 To make video calls one person from the Finns don't want to turn on the camera which was **difficult** for me because I did not know if it was because my English is not perfect. (T3)
- FIN-7 Although it was sometimes **a bit hard** to describe your thoughts or understand what the foreign partners were saying (as their accent was quite different), we managed to keep the conversation alive and fruitful (T2)

POL-10 I was very **pleased** that I could use English in practice. During the work between us there was no language barrier. (T2)

As the above imaginary dialogue shows, it was hard and often frustrating for some of the Finnish students to handle the “language barrier” (FIN-3, FIN-10, FIN-2). On the other hand, there were also reports of overcoming the communication difficulties (FIN-7). The Polish students did not see so much their English skills as a challenge to group interaction (e.g. POL-10). But many of them pointed out the Finns’ limited use of non-verbal cues (e.g. no smiles, switched-off cameras) and brief responses as a hindrance. It is interesting that a Polish participant (POL-12) interpreted the Finnish partner’s not turning on their cameras as a strategy to handle the interlocutor’s poor language skills. Based on the Polish e-portfolios, there was a great need to establish multimodal, non-task related conversations with the Finnish collaborators. Smiles, laughter, chatting about personal topics were seen as forms of “opening up” (POL-9) and community building. However, the Finns were probably very shy in the video-mediated interactions, as was reflected in their project initial fears about technology use.

### 6.2.3 Project closing (Task 5)

In the final week of the VE, the groups shared the outcome of their work in a virtual exhibition. In addition, they had to attend a teacher-facilitated videoconference as the main project-closing event. In this meeting, the teachers gave feedback on the videos and encouraged the participants to share their thoughts and feelings about the project.

The e-portfolios reflect that most students felt less nervous before the final videoconference. Some of them pointed out how much calmer they were compared to the first online meeting because they were familiar with the scenario. However, some nervousness was still reported, for example, about the use of technology (POL-3).

POL-6 This time I was **calm** because I knew what to expect. (T5)

FIN-3 I was **a bit nervous** about the final live meeting. But it was a **nice** experience and it was great to hear what other people felt during the project. (T5)

POL-3 I **wasn’t nervous at all** because I knew what to expect. I couldn’t use my computer so I was a little **afraid** that I will have a connection problems with my phone. ... It was **nice** to take part in such a project. (T5)

FIN-2 I was **not really nervous** before the closing video-conference compared to the first one because I knew what to expect from the general structure of the conference. I **felt more comfortable** talking in front of everyone and expressing my opinions, and I felt like my confidence had grown during the virtual exchange. (T5)

FIN-6 I was **surprised** that I didn’t need to talk more during the last live meeting as I would have been able and willing to. (T5)

POL-7 One **strange** feeling during the conversation was the realization that this is the end of the virtual exchange. (T5)

FIN-3 During the meeting I **felt a bit sad** that the project is over. It felt like it would take a long time and suddenly it was over. However, I am **happy** I participated in this project. (T5)

- FIN-6 I was **quite relieved** that the project was coming to end. (T5)
- POL-12 To sum up the project was very interesting, I'm **glad** that I took part in it. I can meet new people and new culture, I'm **so happy**. Thank you! We made really nice movie and thanks to this I am more **confident** using English. (T5)

Since the students had expectations about the content and the structure of the final video meeting, some of them were surprised (FIN-6) and even disappointed (POL-5) when the tasks were different from what they had expected. Overall, the project ending generated positive feelings such as happiness, relief, gratefulness, and confidence growth. Some students even felt a bit melancholic or expressed having strange feelings when the project was over (FIN-3, POL-7).

As a summary, Figure 1 shows the emotional trajectory of Virtual Exchange (from start to the end).

Task 1 Project opening	Tasks 2-4		Task 5 Project closing
	Collaborating with the Other	Group Interaction	
nervous stressed worried confused awkward afraid	stressed annoyed angry frustrated	challenged awkward frustrated	calm comfortable happy grateful confident satisfied surprised
excited happy curious	excited glad proud satisfied	pleased	sad disappointed nervous

Figure 1. Emotions in VE.

## 7 Discussion

The study focused on the emotional trajectories of a VE project in 2019 spring. In total, 25 e-portfolios were analysed with the help of qualitative dialogic analysis, focusing on the key emotional moments. Both intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogues were created to explore the emotional pathways through a plurality of student voices. As pointed out by Ruohotie-Lyhty et al. (2018), this way of applying the dialogical approach allows for sensitivity regarding both the personal and the social nature of emotions. The individual emotional trajectories formed around two main types of intrapersonal dialogues: 1) personal growth and 2) getting through. Most of the e-portfolios fell into the first category by framing VE as a path of personal development, involving not only a change from negative to more positive emotions but also confidence growth. The overall emotional trajectory of VE was explored with the help of four imagined interpersonal dialogues: Project Opening, Collaborating with the Other, Group Interaction, and Project Closing.

The e-portfolios were written as an assignment, mostly following the genre of learning diaries. Due to the nature of the data, the students' real emotions could not be identified, only the trait emotions (Bieg et al., 2014) that they described in

retrospect. The way the emotions were often expressed and contextualized (e.g. through hedging, intensifying adverbs, and contrastive discourse markers) could indicate a form of emotional management in the e-portfolios (Prior, 2016), but it could also be due to the participants' (non-native) English repertoire of emotional terms. A further explanation could be the impact of the first language (mother tongue) on the framing of emotions in English. Some cultures express emotions quite explicitly and have specific phrases for their linguistic formulation, while other cultures have a more limited set of emotional expressions (Lindquist et al. 2015).

As pointed out by Jokikokko and Uitto (2017), meaningful intercultural experiences are emotionally loaded. Emotions emerge during the lived experience of transformative intercultural learning, which may lead to questioning one's worldview, ways of thinking, and actions. The e-portfolios of the Finnish-Polish VE were rich in emotional statements since the students encountered intercultural, digital, linguistic and collaborative challenges as part of a novel learning experience. The trajectories reflect a range of emotions, with negative emotions being dominant in the initial and collaborative phases, and positive emotions towards the end.

In line with findings on foreign language anxiety in VE (Fondo & Jacobetty, 2020), negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, and stress were reported about the use of technology and English, especially before the first video meeting. Most of the students were nervous because they had to interact with strangers in a new scenario. The novelty of the situation generated fear of the unknown for many. However, the first videoconference worked like an icebreaker, which underlines the importance of the synchronous mode in the creation of trust (Olson & Olson, 2006; Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020) and social presence (Whiteside et al., 2017). Audio-visual media richness, for example nonverbal cues, can enhance the effectiveness of communication (Klitmøller & Luring, 2013; Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020) and, as the Polish students reported, are important for establishing rapport.

The interpersonal dialogues emerging around the collaborative tasks embraced two main themes: Collaboration with the Other and Group Interaction. With regard to both themes, frustration and awkwardness were the dominant feelings. The emotional statements about the "other" reflected "us-versus-them" attitudes in both countries, confirming findings in previous research on virtual teams (Cramton & Hinds, 2004). The Finns often felt frustrated or annoyed when "the Polish side" was late for a meeting, while the Polish students had similar feelings when "the Finnish side" was not contributing enough. Communication in English was accompanied with frustration and awkwardness, especially by the Finnish students, who were more fluent in the language. The Poles felt uncomfortable by the Finns' short responses and limited use of nonverbal cues. The resulting "awkward silences" and other communication glitches made some participants feel uncomfortable.

The lack of shared group history, mental models, conceptual frameworks and personal relationships in a team (Cramton, 2001; Maynard & Gilson, 2014; Cundill et al., 2018) can lead to difficulty in communicating and in interpreting silence (Cramton, 2001). In VE, the use of a foreign language when interacting with strangers via digital tools adds to this set of challenges (Fondo & Jacobetty, 2020). The participants do not have opportunities for informal and unintentional encounters that often take place in shared physical spaces such as a university



campus (Berry, 2011), which entails the risk of less personal rapport and less affective commitment among the group members (Johnson et al., 2009).

However, the successful completion of the project and the final group product resulted in happiness, satisfaction, calmness, and gratefulness for many, which implies the importance of accomplishing common goals in overcoming subgroup salience and ethnocentrism. As pointed out by Jokikokko and Uitto (2017), when learners engage in demanding and discomforting learning processes, negative (discomforting) emotions may have a constituting role in challenging beliefs, practices and habits. Growth and change do not come without a crisis (Boler 1999, as cited in Jokikokko & Uitto, 2017, p. 25). In VE, the participants go through an emotionally loaded and challenging learning path, but after completing all the tasks and overcoming the initial difficulties, most of them find it a rewarding experience.

## 8 Conclusion

Participating in Virtual Exchange is always a unique and memorable experience. By integrating intercultural, digital and social dimensions, it acts as a safe playground to practice employment skills needed for the global world of work. However, as the present study showed, it can be an emotionally challenging endeavour.

Powell and Menendian (2016, p. 17) define othering as “a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities”. As they point out, it is natural for humans to create categories. However, the meanings associated with the categories are socially constructed and often built on negative stereotypes and ethnocentrism. Therefore, at a societal level, Powell and Menendian (2016, p. 33) recommend the creation of structural safeguards against othering and opportunities for open dialogues between social groups. In VE, “humanizing the other” (Powell & Menendian, 2016) can happen through open discussions on difference and a critical approach to communality (Hauck, 2020).

Since the students tend to get nervous at the beginning of the project, it is good if the teachers can reduce their fears by facilitating open discussions about initial emotions. The teacher’s role as a mentor is essential throughout the VE (O’Dowd et al., 2019) because the participants need opportunities for socio-emotional support. In addition to icebreakers and team-building tasks, the projects should also address difference in an open and critical way, allowing the students to voice their thoughts and emotions in safe, guided and facilitated conversations.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank to Katarzyna Radke (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland) for her insights, teaching collaboration, and support.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1. FIN-2*

I was a bit nervous before the start of the Virtual Exchange program and especially the first video-conference because the entire project was to be completed online. I had previous experience from working in a virtual team but during that exchange I still met with the course instructors in person. However, once the first video-conference started and we began introducing ourselves, I became less nervous and felt more at ease. I was also more confident in expressing myself in front of everyone. Before our first meeting as a group, I was not anxious at all, and even though we had a lot of technical difficulties during the video meeting because of bad internet connection, we were able to have a successful meeting. (T1)

In addition, there were again some technological difficulties that in combination with language barriers created “awkward silences”. For example, a group member’s video would get slow or completely cut off, and others could not hear or understand what they were saying. Because we did not know each other that well during that time, we did not really say anything but rather just waited until the situation passed. It is of course a bit uncomfortable to keep asking what the other person is trying to say if they are constantly being cut off since they would have to repeat themselves over and over again, but if I were to be in that situation again, I would ask them to do so because if others do not say anything, you will not know if the message has come across or you might not even be aware of the interruptions in the video. I chose this example because it demonstrates how - even if it feels a bit awkward in that moment - open discussion and honesty benefit the group in the long term as they create an atmosphere that allows for constructive criticism and freedom of expression. (T2)

Before finishing the video call, we decided that both Finnish and Polish students would work in pairs and film the material for the video during the upcoming week. I was satisfied with our meeting because we had quite a clear idea about what we were going to do and we had a fruitful discussion about the theme of our video. Again, there were some awkward silences but that did not really affect the end result of our report. When we were editing the report together on Google Drive, I learned that it is actually useful to have a video or audio call on at the same time because it is much easier to ask for help or comment on something via a call when editing a document than by using a written chat. (T3)

The production of the video was the most challenging yet also the most enjoyable part of the project. I met with the other Finnish member in our group and we filmed material for the video all around >TOWN<. At first, it felt a bit weird to meet in person since we did not know each other before and we had only talked in English online. However, once we actually met, our teamwork was seamless and we enjoyed filming the material together. (T4)

During the video production process, one of the Polish members in our group was quite absent in the chat, which is why it was difficult to tell whether they participated in the process or not. However, I believe that they worked on the project offline with the other Polish student even though they did not communicate it in the group chat. If I were to participate in a project like this again, I would make sure that there is

enough communication within the group and every participant knows their assigned tasks because at the end of the video process, our group did not really interact and there was also some confusion about how the workload was divided. This affected the atmosphere of the group a bit negatively and emphasized the importance of straightforward communication. (T4)

I was not really nervous before the closing video-conference compared to the first one because I knew what to expect from the general structure of the conference. I felt more comfortable talking in front of everyone and expressing my opinions, and I felt like my confidence had grown during the virtual exchange. (T5)

Received November 18, 2020  
Revision received March 6, 2021  
Accepted March 31, 2021