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Authors	O'Reilly, Claire;Arnold, Maik
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Life-Writing and Virtual Exchange:

An Exploration of the Impact on Students' Learning Experiences

Claire O'Reilly, University College Cork and Maik Arnold, Fachhochschule Dresden – University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

While we find ourselves immersed in a virtual society, the opportunity to use digital technologies for dialogue and understanding is still not well represented at third-level, despite the dramatic move towards teaching online during the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper presents a web-based Virtual Exchange (VE) between Cork (UCC) and the *Fachhochschule* Dresden (FHD) with a focus on life-writing and biography, developing qualitative research skills and speaking the foreign language (FL). Each student was tasked with conducting three interviews with their designated peer in the FL and producing a website (blog) or e-portfolio to present and reflect on findings. The first iteration of the module took place in 2020-21. This paper discusses students' learning experiences during the updated, follow-up course in 2021-22. Findings show that they learned most in the interaction with their peers, learning through self-disclosure, sharing meaningful experiences, negotiating (difficult) life experiences and expanding their FL skills. The findings also point to evidence of transformational learning in the sample group. We conclude with some insights regarding the future development of the VE and include important limitations of the study.

Key words: life-writing; virtual exchange; thematic analysis; transformational learning

Introduction

Up to and until the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, many of the tried-and-tested learning approaches at third-level followed the predictable pattern of formal, frontal classroom scenarios, often ignoring the fact that students are embedded daily in social media for many of their communication needs. Connecting the digital literacies of students to their learning environments, Zuzevičiūtė et al. (2014) argue that:

> As young people daily use Web 2.0 technologies, the formal educational environment of colleges and universities should provide *guidance and support necessary to help the students to develop thinking skills of high level; to remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, create within the space of social media services*" (p. 44; italics added).

Zuzevičiūtė and colleagues' recognition of the fact that there is still some way to go to bridge the gap between teaching approaches and the integration of digital practices is echoed in many universities' Teaching and Learning strategies that support students to use electronic learning technologies as part of their development into independent learners (cf. Strategic Plan 2017-2022, UCC, 2017, p. 28). Moreover, while the Covid-19 pandemic brought about a shift in how classes were delivered using web-based technologies, at ground-level, the use of Web 2.0 technologies within the classroom is still only filtering slowly into university curricula (cf. Guth et al., 2012; Görl-Rottstädt et al., 2021).

One pedagogical approach that employs digital technologies in the classroom has traditionally been found within a FL-classroom setting (cf. O'Dowd, 2022, forthcoming). Using internet-based technology, a VE presents an innovative opportunity for structured online collaboration between participants in geographically distant locations. In this vein, a VE between UCC and the FHD took place in 2021-22, where students had, as a remit, to exchange their life-stories and biographies, communicating in German (Irish students) and English (German students). The design of the module was centred primarily around biography, developing qualitative research skills and FL-competence. To this end, emphasis was placed on developing empathetic listening and interview skills, as well as critical reflection and data analysis. Students received consent forms concerning the interview process that they were to undertake in completion of the module (compulsory) and to advise them that their learning experiences would be reviewed and form part of an analysis by the authors (optional)[1]. Employing a thematic analysis approach, interviews with four students were carried out after the course and form the basis of our discussion. In addition to these interviews, one creative interpretation from the blogs will also be included in the findings, as

[1] All students discussed in this paper gave their consent for their feedback to be included here.

it illustrates a different form of engagement with the course concepts. The main question being addressed is: What kind of learning experiences emerge from a combination of life-writing with digital technologies in a VE? The theoretical framework of our collaboration is located, in part, in research on VE, therefore, this will first be discussed to contextualise the backdrop against which the learning effort took place.

Theoretical Background

Virtual Exchange

The term Virtual Exchange, according to O'Dowd (2022, p. 17), refers to "the numerous online learning initiatives and methodologies which engage learners in sustained online collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programmes". An additional important aspect of VE is that it takes place under the guidance of expert facilitators (cf. Guth et al., 2012) who mentor the students and guide the process. An expansive body of research testifies to an array of learning outcomes arising from a VE-classroom setting, including foreign language skills and the motivation to learn a language (Nishio et al., 2020) intercultural competence (Lenkaitis et al. 2019) and awareness of Self and Other in intercultural communication processes (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020). Systematic reviews of recent research have also lent weight to the multiple benefits of VE in relation to language and intercultural learning (cf. Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Avgousti, 2018). Other studies have shown evidence of critical thinking (Von der Emde et al., 2001), and critical digital literacies (Hauck, 2019). Newer developments have addressed important societal change and the beneficial role that VE can play; O'Dowd (2020) found that VE can be a vehicle for promoting global citizenship's core values, such as respect for diversity and solidarity for humanity. It has also been employed as a medium for students to process

trauma arising from the Covid-19 crisis (González-Ceballos et al., 2021; Porto et al., 2021), and for working through international conflicts and controversies (Watanabe, 2020).

The evidence, therefore, points to the fact that VE has the potential to translate into a powerful tool to generate multifaceted learning outcomes, extending well beyond language advancement, and to help address emerging societal change and traumatic experiences. In relation to the key concepts in this course, we have, as yet, not found other studies which have specifically focused on life-writing and biography (see section 2.4 below) within VE, although some have used biographical aspects such language learning biographies or digital storytelling. This study, therefore, widens the application lens of VE and examines the suitability of biographical methods within VE, which has the potential of extending beyond the remit of the FL-classroom and being translatable to other (disciplinary) contexts. To create a supportive online environment between Irish and German students, we encouraged principles of reciprocity, autonomy and equality (cf. Salomão & Viana da Silva, 2019). Each student was to assist the other to listen while remaining autonomous, and equal opportunities for speaking the FL were very much encouraged (Salomão & Viana da Silva, 2019, p. 2). To this end, it was recommended that students focus on one language or the other, at any one time, to ensure less FL-codeswitching which, in turn, would benefit the data analysis stage later.

Life-Writing and Biography

Life-writing, which has been used since the eighteenth century (Winslow, 1995, p. 37), is an umbrella concept capturing the non-fiction writing of memories and experiences of Self or Other. It embraces “every possible way of telling a life-story, from biography and autobiography, through letters and memoir, to bio-fiction, blogs, and social media such as Tweets and Instagram stories” (Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, 2022). The concept of

biography was of particular interest for our VE. Following the Greek meaning of "*bios"* (life) and "*graphein"* (to write) (Winslow, 1995, p. 8) and "narrative" as "the recounting of a story; the story-telling element" (Winslow, 1995, p. 43), students were to capture the biography of their peer as s/he told it. Some concepts to frame and direct the interview experience included Wengraf's (2019) Biographic-Narrative-Interpretive Method (BNIM), which is increasingly gaining traction for exploring lived experiences through biographic-narrative interviews. This approach seeks to understand the person's whole life story (biography) and how it is told (narrative). Taking Wengraf's assumption that "narrative expression" expresses both conscious concerns, and unconscious cultural, societal and individual presuppositions and processes (Wengraf, 2019, p. 75), students were prompted to think about *how* to listen and *what* they were hearing. In this regard the distinction between "lived life" and "told story" as raised by Rosenthal (2004, p. 62), "the difference between biographical self-presentation at the time of narration and the experience in the past" was important. Issues such as performativity and identity were also discussed here as mediating and guiding factors in presentation of Self.

As students' projects were to be presented via an e-portfolio (Canvas™) or a blog (WordPress™), short video introductions were created on setting up the e-portfolio feature within the learning platform Canvas and creating a personal blog. Table 1 provides, in overview form, details concerning the course design.

Table 1

Course Design Overview

COURSE DESIGN SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2021			
Focus **S= student** **L=lecturer/s**	**UCC Activities**	**FHD Activities**	**Weeks**
L-S	Thematic input on life-writing, biography, interviewing and qualitative research methods	Recruitment of German students, introduction to the VE module	1-6
L-S	UCC-FHD first meeting Thematic input in German on e-portfolios and websites		7
L-S	Thematic input on analysis of transcripts (thematic analysis) and on semi-structured interviews	Introduction to thematic analysis	7-10
S-S L-S S	Peer-to-peer interviews (online) Feedback on interview process and student mentoring Preparation of blogs and e-portfolios (assignments)		7-11
S-S-L	Presentation of assignments and group feedback session		12

Blog sites have gradually become an increasingly popular means of communication and self-expression, and in recent years as a qualitative research tool for data collection (cf. Harricharan & Bhopal, 2014). None of the students had any prior knowledge of creating blogs or e-portfolios. It was also the first time that they carried out interviews and engaged in data analysis in a systematic way.

Transformational Learning

This study explores whether there was any evidence for transformational learning in the VE sample group. Transformational learning theory suggests that students learn best when their frames of reference (FoR) are challenged (Mezirow, 2000). A FoR encompasses habits of the mind (ways of thinking, feeling and behaving) and points of view (values and beliefs). Once

FoR are challenged, transformational learning can occur through problem-solving and critical reflection of the worldview that led to the previous ways of thinking. Interactive group activities such as role-playing, feedback exchange, or case studies can provide opportunities for this type of learning to occur (cf. Fazio-Griffith & Ballard, 2016, p. 227) resulting in fundamental shifts in oneself and how one interacts with the world (cf. JTED, 2022). While not face-to-face in the traditional sense, a VE offers the potential for transformational learning in providing a space for interpersonal interaction and feedback exchange, where familiar frames of reference may be challenged.

Methodology

Participants

Fourteen students took part in our VE: In Cork, nine students were in their final year of their 4-year degree, 'Commerce (International) with German', and a further student was an Arts student (World Languages). The average age of the Irish students was 22 years. In Dresden, three students from the degree programme 'Social Pedagogy and Management' and one student studying 'Media Informatics and Media Design' participated in the VE, and at an average age of 25, were slightly older than the Irish students[2].

Two students at each campus provided follow-up qualitative interviews after the exchange had ended and grading was completed. As these students were most expressive of their learning in their written work, they were deemed suited to the purpose and analytical lens of this study, also due to their "willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner" (cf. Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2).

[2] In addition, six students at the University for Applied Sciences Regensburg were invited to partake in order to bridge a gap in student-pairings between the FHD and UCC.

Emer[3] is an Irish 22-year-old student, and at the time of writing, in her final year at university. She had spent one year in Germany during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the VE, she was partnered with Conny based on shared interests in socialising and an interest to learn from others. Emer describes herself as having a very bubbly personality, being shy and, at times, "closed-minded".

Tim is also a 22-year-old Irish student in his final year. He was partnered with Ingrid, due to their business background, shared love of travelling and learning foreign languages. He describes himself as a motivated and engaged person, who loves researching and has a passion for language learning especially after his Erasmus+ year in Germany during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lisa is a 20-year-old German student in her first year at university, who came to Ireland after her schooling to complete a social work placement before returning to Dresden to commence her studies. She was partnered with Niamh due to their interest in cultural activities. She describes herself as interested in learning languages and having an emotional bond with Ireland following her placement.

Hans is a 20-year-old German student in his first year at university. He was partnered with Rebecca due to their common interest in media design and films. He describes himself as interested in creating blogs and websites and is currently writing screenplays for short animation movies.

Procedure

Research presented in this paper echoes the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) paradigm, which is recognised as a systematic and methodologically supported reflection of one's own teaching (Hutchings et al., 2011). In addition, a case study approach was followed,

[3] The names of students have been changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

which is a valuable theoretical approach providing multi-perspectival analysis of the first-hand experience of individuals in any given setting (see, for example Gallagher, 2019).

The focus on the interviews provided individual accounts of the impact of the VE on students' learning experiences (see Table 2).

Table 2

Data Collection and Sources

Data Format	Method	Digital Tools	Type of Data	Timeframe (semester weeks)
Individual Interviews	Case-study based on qualitative interviews with students N=2 (Irish students) N=2 (German students)	MS Teams	Post-reflection about learning outcomes	3 months after the module

The interpretative methodology chosen for the analysis of the interviews with the student sample was thematic analysis which can be understood as "the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). This technique requires the researcher to construct common or contradicting themes from the data, which may be utilised as a foundation for data interpretation (Clarke et al., 2015), and necessitates the reading and re-reading of the written material employing coding and category-building. Questions were asked about experiences during the VE, including the acquisition of knowledge and use of the FL, and about the VE vis-à-vis their wider learning experiences. Semantic transcripts were created from the audio recordings of the interviews without the use of proprietorial qualitative software. Instead, for the analysis, a table was generated to organise codes and themes similar to the presented data extract. Table 3 shows an example of the coding procedure applied and allocation of corresponding themes.

Table 3

Data Extract with Codes Application **(adopted from Clarke et al., 2015)**

Data Extract	**Themes**
I was so lucky with the partner that I was with, she was so forthcoming from the start, like literally from the beginning, she was so open with me with everything I asked, she went into such detail. And I suppose for me, like I mentioned in my project, I just wasn't expecting that at all.	openness of peer
[…] I suppose it was just that she was so forthcoming that I had to be, I had to really open up myself and tell her things that even my friends wouldn't know about family and personal lives.	self-disclosure

Findings

The case study findings draw on the interviews of Tim and Emer on the Irish side, and Lisa and Hans on the German side. The systematic application of thematic analysis brought to light the following categories and themes: (1) Knowledge and appreciation of life-writing through biographical interviews; (2) Affective competence: Empathy, open-mindedness and mutual trust; (3) The use and advancement of FL skills; (4) Motivation for self-directed learning; (5) Transferable skills.

Recognising the value of quotations, as Patton noted, which can "help to reveal the respondents' levels of emotion, the way in which they have organised their worlds, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions" (Patton, 1990, p. 24), sample excerpts from the interviews submitted are given below. The German students' quotations have been translated by the authors and are included here in the English version.

Knowledge and Appreciation of Life-Writing Through Biographical Interviews

Before and during the peer-to-peer interviewing process, students developed both knowledge of life-writing as a concept and a greater appreciation for the art of LW, specifically biographical writing, as they carried out their own interviews. One student creatively expressed her engagement with life-writing and biographical methods in her blog (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

A Visual Representation of the Process **(Reproduced with permission, Curran, 2022)**[4]



[4] The painting has been included here also as an example of a non-textual creative learning impact arising from the inclusion of life-writing and biographical concepts. Written permission for the reproduction of the painting and for the citation was received from the student and anonymity was waived by the student.

In the student's words:

> […] this is an abstract piece representing the complexity of the human psyche. It highlights the disorderly nature of life and seeks to creatively capture the process. The face gets lost in the chaos – it appears a mess – yet the paint is still within the lines, therefore, it appears to be an organised mess. (Curran)

The painting captures the beauty and the challenge of understanding biography – being colourful and fragmented, yet only with some distance can the beholder only begin to see what is really going on. Moreover, in the artist's view, the picture reflected the unpredictability of the data collection stage, as she noted: "I also felt this describes how the interviews went in a way. They were organised, yet unpredictable and at times messy, no matter how prepared I was". The sentiments not only provide an interpretation of the painting from Curran's perspective, but also echo other students' views on the interview process being complex, messy and, at times, surprising.

An appreciation for the building of skills in relation to interviewing was a running thread throughout. In response to a question about course content and life-writing, Tim responded:

> Yeah, that was amazing. Because after learning about life-writing and interviewing, you gain a whole new perspective and respect for interviewing…it's more interesting. And you know, for reading biographies or autobiographies, you can have a lot more respect for those bodies of work because you respect what goes into it – how to find out about a person's life and to think about what was important when, what is the logical sequence? (Tim)

Affective Competence: Empathy, Open-mindedness and Mutual Trust

The interviewing process brought home to the students the need for *empathy* and brought the need for sensitivity to the fore. A realisation that these traits were necessary was due, in part,

to the fact that some memories of childhood brought difficult and, at times, traumatic experiences to the fore. This was, by all accounts, not expected:

> I expected this to be a very general interview, just to get to know each other, however, from the offset, Conny was quite open with me and we discussed difficult topics such as a traumatic childhood, divorce, bullying, her complex family situation […]. I was quite taken aback by the first interview but grateful that she felt she could be so open with me. (Emer)

As the course progressed, students noticed a difference in their role of interviewer and the rather less comfortable role as interviewee, as Emer recounts over the course of her interviews:

> […] and the third time when I was asking her these questions, she turned around to me, like, what about you? What's your opinion? And what was your fondest childhood memory? What was your saddest childhood memory? I suppose I really didn't expect her to ask me back. So, I was taken aback […] and I could lie, you know. But then I was like, sure, what's the point? And so, I suppose it was just that she was so forthcoming that I had to be… I had to really open myself. (Emer)

Thus, the reciprocal nature of the interview process challenged the student not only in terms of the self-disclosure by her peer, but later, as she was confronted with the decision whether to "really open up" herself or not. The raw detail entailed in narrating one's life-story and the discussion of difficult topics necessitated the development of greater *open-mindedness* in the students. This also called into question familiar approaches of self-disclosure and also led the student to reassess cultural categorisations:

> So, it was like, for me, I said, [Emer], you're going to have to do the same. I suppose that wouldn't really be me at all, like I would just tell people what they needed to know. I feel like that's what we do in Ireland. We tell people what they need to know. You know, we keep our family lives and our private lives to ourselves. (Emer)

Hence, perceptions of "what we do in Ireland" were revisited by the student and made her think about what familiar patterns in Ireland mean, challenging hitherto assumptions about how, and if, private and personal details are typically shared. In turn, she also reflected on how assumed national perceptions of Other differed to encountered reality:

> I was of the perception that Germans were very private people, so I thought we would just speak about topics generally, but [...] we spoke about personally difficult areas in both our lives which didn't lend easy answers. I really appreciated that we could both be so honest. (Emer)

On a lighter note, the interviews were experienced naturally and provided a way for personal exchange with students from another country that was seen as fun, which, in turn, helped to build *mutual trust and understanding*:

> [...] and the thing for me that was the most valuable was the encounter itself. We just both understood each other so well. […] And the thing was that it was just mega fun too. (Hans)

The interviews were so enjoyable for Hans that he noted a 'flow' in discussions during the sessions, helping him to forget the technical requirements of the assignment at times, "[...] a conversation flow came about then, because your partner went into detail and completely forgot about this interview then".

The Use and Advancement of FL Skills

The opportunity to use German throughout the VE was valued by Irish students, particularly where the Erasmus+ experience was less than hoped for:

> […] in Germany we didn't get as much of an opportunity [to speak German] with Covid-19 and everything. Not that they're kind of rude, but if you can't speak perfect German, they're like, no, we'll just talk English. And then they talk in English. Which is […] a bit heart-breaking, and then you wouldn't want to go on and try and talk German to someone else. (Emer)

The fact that Emer found it difficult to speak German abroad (being highly motivated and well-prepared), meant that she approached the opportunity to speak German with reluctance and a lack of confidence generally in the VE: “I was really quite worried going into the interviews, because I was like, I have everything prepared in German, but, you know, she’ll probably just switch back to English”. That her expectation did not meet with reality was clearly a relief:

> But no, Conny was, she was, so good. If I couldn't get something across, she helped me. So that kind of put me at ease a lot. (Emer)

Although not at all fluent in the FL, students helped each other to continue the conversation:

> Yes, even if at times it didn’t quite work with the language, be it in German or in English, because my English is not perfect either, we could still make ourselves understood and by the end arrive at an answer – for both sides. (Lisa)

Emer noted how the conversations demanded a new level of vocabulary:

> But you know, I wouldn't have had a lot of the vocabulary that she was talking about. I was very nervous going into the first one. [...] And then when things got heavier, she helped me along with vocabulary and things. She put words in the chat in German so that I’d be able to take it down and learn from it. (Emer)

For Tim, who noted that he did speak a lot of German on his year abroad, the VE was a “continuation of his year abroad goals”, and he welcomed the opportunity to continue speaking with a German “native” speaker, noting the confidence, and the extra vocabulary that this gave him:

> And then in interview two, and three, we went into deeper conversations, and maybe my German wasn't, you know, it really had to take a step-up. In that regard, I found myself searching for a word, and Ingrid was teaching me more German as it went on. [...] I got a lot of confidence from talking to Ingrid [...]. I had conversations that I

> would never have had before and that, you know, vocabulary, tenses, using all the language was probably progressively harder. (Tim)

Motivation for Self-directed Learning

Students were motivated to initiate self-directed and personal learning on subjects that interested them and which were not part of the course design. As noted, active and empathetic listening was at the heart of the interviewing process, and in order to better understand how Conny felt, Emer researched the subject of trauma further:

> […] I wasn't prepared for […] but I listened, was empathetic towards Conny and I appreciated everything she was telling me. I wanted to understand how she felt, and so I researched about the topics we had discussed and read journals on how trauma in one's life can have different effects. (Emer)

Hence, she initiated self-directed learning by consulting literature on psychology for help to understand similar situations in the future. In Tim's case he also undertook further research in relation to gender and sport to understand emerging differences being shared in the interviews. Lisa mentioned that she planned to study or work abroad and that the VE provided "preparation for going abroad, or even an incentive, or a motivation itself to go". In all, the engagement with peers brought about self-initiated learning leading to a sense of personal achievement, and the high levels of personal satisfaction was a notable learning outcome for all, in Tim's words: "Overall, I am proud of the effort I put into this project and proud of my findings [...], with this project I am genuinely interested and passionate about my findings".

Transferable Skills

As has often been noted in previous VE studies, this pedagogical approach lends itself to the development of an array of transferable skills, and this was also perceived by the students in this sample with the content being close to "real-life". Emer argued:

> I learned so much in this module that was actually applicable to real-life, rather than like, you know, in some other modules, you learn it [sic.] for the curriculum, and then you forget about it, or for the exam, and then it's just information that you have, but you'll probably never use again. I think this module is all real-life-based […], like you learn so many transferable skills in this module compared to other modules.

Career skills such as interviewing, communication, confidence and digital skills, i.e. the ability to build a website like WordPress were mentioned a number of times "building a WordPress site, you know, is also a brilliant skill" (Tim), and students largely agreed that more of this approach be used in the classroom, as Hans argued "Yes, […] this Wordpress-thing is a good starting point…to build oneself a website. You know, we should do more of this" (Hans).

Suggestions for Future Iterations of the Module and Limitations of this Research

Changes and improvements to future iterations of the module relate first to the assignment associated with the project. While all students were to include a critical reflection component in their work, in the future, selected models of reflection may be integrated to help students structure their thoughts, such as the DEAL model (Describe, Examine and Articulate Learning) (cf. Ash & Clayton, 2009), rather than presenting the students with the generic and vague task of "doing" critical analysis. Second, due to the personal, and at times, sensitive nature of the content, the mode of assignment-delivery will be changed. One student asked if s/he could submit a separate word document on their observations, as s/he wanted to engage sensitively to information deemed not suitable for a public domain – therefore, the assessment format will be modified to include a reflective learning journal and/or an essay form. Further, biography as a thematic field has revealed a very insightful tool for dialogue and understanding within a VE, and the potential is there to realise more. For example, questions of performativity and identity were touched on, but this and related questions could be unfolded to a greater extent in future iterations, such as strategies used to depict the self,

problems of truth and fictionalising, and creativity in the narration of self (seen in the case of Curran here, but which could be expanded to include artefacts such as personal photos, letters or other archival materials). As seen in the first iteration of biographical methods in the VE-classroom (cf. O'Reilly & Arnold, 2021), this collaboration revealed that the opportunities for learning through and with biographical methods in a VE are vast.

Although the contribution of small-scale empirical studies to the field is significant and can point in many valuable directions (Gillespie, 2018), a number of limitations of this paper are important for context and need mentioning: We included only part of our findings and the close-up experiences of a small sample of students presents only a narrow lens within one (Irish-German) context. In the future, we would like to include more data and use a triangulation approach to gain further insights and objectivity on the learning outcomes. Further, we are mindful that the VE-learning outcomes will vary according to future decisions concerning disciplinary-pairings and stage of degree, the language proficiency of students and these, and other factors, could be considered in more detail in the future. Notwithstanding the small-scale nature of this study, the sample learning experiences do reflect many of the studies discussed earlier concerning the positive impact of VE on students both professionally and personally, and this will be discussed in more detail below.

The Impact of VE on Students: Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the qualitative experience of students participating in a VE in terms of the learning impact and to ask if there is evidence of transformational learning. The findings demonstrate that VE-activities based on the application of life-writing, biography and qualitative research methods, with peer-to-peer-interviews, present a welcome and state-of-the-art opportunity for *multifaceted learning outcomes* beyond knowledge of the course content. Students showed awareness of developing *empathetic listening*, *open-mindedness and trust* to their peers which made their encounters meaningful and enriching. One

unexpected outcome observed was how open students were in disclosing sensitive topics such as traumatic experiences in childhood, and losses and challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. The depth of engagement evident in the sample echoes Ní Dhúill's viewpoint that biography itself can serve as a looking glass in encounters, recognition, expression, and identity (Ní Dhúill, 2020, p. 12). Not all students needed to or chose to go into such depth, but the interviews were seen as the fulcrum around which the learning happened, both in class and in peer-to-peer sessions. Both sides talked about the hope to stay in touch with their partners, which points to *friendships* and to longer-term impacts of the course design.

As students presented their findings via a blog or e-portfolio, *digital literacy competencies* were addressed and advanced. As they engaged with each other outside the classroom setting in a one-to-one digital space, *(inter-)cultural learning* occurred where expectations differed with the reality of their encounters. In this regard, in our post-course discussions and analysis, a difference in the learning foci of the students became evident; Irish students focussed on biographical methods learning *indirectly* about interculturality, while the German students used the VE to more *directly* expand their knowledge about Ireland and Irish culture (cf. direct/indirect interculturality, Rebane & Arnold, 2021, p. 376f.).

While much of the learning happened between students informally, the classroom environment provided a sounding board to help them process and reflect on their individual encounters. The interviews also required conversational depth and a *more advanced level of FL* in terms of vocabulary and communicative expressions, which was handled sensitively between students. Perhaps more telling than the language advancement, was the *growing confidence from one interview to the next with correspondingly decreasing fear in using the FL.* Irish students, particularly, noted satisfaction in the equality and use of the FL. The VE presented a welcome departure from the lived experiences of the year abroad for some, and an enjoyable extension of speaking German after the year abroad for others.

Students viewed the real-life scenarios as offering the potential for *high transferability to other work and study contexts*. That learning in the VE was actively acquired and constructed by students together virtually was seen as a welcome departure to traditional classroom-based learning formats. Last but not least, we noted how students reflected on their work in the VE and their own learning experience with *satisfaction and pride* (echoing Pearson & Somekh, 2006).

Returning to the idea of transformational education, which "fosters *deep engagement with and reflection on our taken-for-granted ways of viewing the world*" (JTED, 2022, italics added, n.d.), there is evidence in this study of both deep engagement and reflection on taken-for-granted ways of viewing the world. Whether or not it can provide a "fundamental shift in how we see and understand ourselves" (JTED, 2022) depends on a number of factors, such as the effort that students put into the assignment and the level of engagement with the interviews, e.g. "when I really engaged with the whole aspect of narratives and told narratives versus actual life, that is when it became transformational for me and how to write life" (Tim). Others saw the potential for transformation as being dependent on the mindset. Emer refers to the opportunity for transformation of Self or Other drawing similarities to "therapy sessions". The fact that she originally described herself as closed-minded and later refers to being open-minded is instructive and points to a change, reminiscent of a possible "fundamental shift" in her frame of reference seen as a precondition for transformational learning.

In sum, the extent of transformational learning depended on the student's engagement and his/her willingness to be open to change and is reflective of our observations in the classroom. Recognition by students of a change in their own outlook and an openness to engage where they hadn't before points to a powerful tool to generate perspective-switching and learning about Self and Other. This observation lends support to the theory that critical

self-analysis can challenge one's existing frame of reference and, in turn, trigger a transformational process (Mezirow, 2000). While only a small sample is discussed here, the case study points to the fact that biographical methods can help bring about multifarious learning impacts and opportunities for (transformational) learning.

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