

## What is VE?

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a practice, supported by research, that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators. Virtual Exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology. See: <https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/>

VE aims to allow an increasing number of people to have a meaningful intercultural experience as part of their formal and/or non-formal education. This type of activity may be situated in educational programmes across the curriculum in order to increase mutual understanding, and global citizenship, as well as in informal education projects. Virtual Exchange also fosters the development of what have been recognized as employability skills such as digital competence (the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively online), foreign language competence, communication skills, media literacy and the ability to work in a diverse cultural context.

### Virtual Exchange is:

- Sustained: unfolding over time with regular, intensive interaction;
- Technology-enabled: using new media, digital, and/or mobile technologies;
- Preferably based on regular synchronous or near-synchronous meetings using high social presence media;
- People-to-people: involving inclusive, intercultural collaboration and dialogue, that bridges differences and distances and inspires action with a long term positive impact on relationships;
- Learner-led: following the philosophy of dialogue where participants are the main recipients and the main drivers of knowledge; learning through dialogue means that participants will be seeking mutual understanding and co-creating knowledge, based on their own experiences.
- Facilitated: with the support of trained facilitators and/or educators;
- Educational: Integrated into formal and/or non-formal educational programmes and activities to develop measurable increases in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that foster pro-social behaviours;
- Structured to foster mutual understanding: covering topics related to identity, empathy, perspective taking, critical reflection, intercultural understanding, and helping participants to engage in constructive conversations in the face of ontological and epistemological differences; a key tenet of VE is that intercultural understanding and awareness are not automatic outcomes of contact between different groups/cultures.

### The following terms are sometimes taken as synonyms to VE and can overlap with it:

- Telecollaboration in the field of language learning;
- Globally networked learning;
- Collaborative online international learning;
- Online Intercultural Exchange.

### The following types of programs do not fall under VE:

- Simple MOOCs with no sustained interactions between small groups of students;
- Distance learning courses;
- Creating social media groups;
- Unmoderated, unsustained, unstructured programs;
- Virtual mobility which is closer to distance online education: that is 'studying abroad' at another institution without having to go there and making claims to intercultural learning purely through being 'cross-border';
- Programs that lack a sustained pedagogy for interaction, such as programs with only one moment for interaction, like a one-off meeting.

**Spaced learning** is also at the core of many Virtual Exchange programs. *Spaced learning* means that learning happens during a period of time, and the learning in the program is related to and reflected in other contexts outside of the program – the contexts that are most familiar to the learner. For example, the participants will connect the program discussions & learning to what they hear on the media. Or they process the dialogue discussions during the week on their own, with their friends and family, or with their university class. So the learning from the virtual exchange has the chance to seep in and be digested between exchange sessions. This allows for people to have deep reflective learning as the learning model grounds this international experience within their own everyday life.

## The pedagogical objectives of Synchronous Facilitated Dialogue in VE

The core of VE dialogue is about engaging with difference: communicating, learning, exploring topics, thinking critically with each other and experiencing how differences impact communication. It is also about learning that despite differences, it is possible to communicate with each other constructively and learn with and from each other. Following are the main skills acquired by participants to Dialogue VE:

### Cross-Cultural Communication Skills

- Develop participants' cross-cultural communication skills and their ability to engage in constructive dialogue across difference.
- Enable participants to recognize the necessity of engaging constructively with alternative perspectives.
- Develop the ability to represent one's points of view and provide space for hearing the points of view of multiple and diverse parties in a productive discussion process.
- Develop participants' awareness of oneself as a communicator and their ability to foster constructive communication.

### Empathy: Relationship Building, Appreciating & Respecting Others

- Encourage participants to approach dialogue and differences with a genuine curiosity and an intention for understanding.
- Allow participants to acknowledge each other's emotions and humanity by connecting with others' experiences and feelings.
- Enhance participants' ability to appreciate and respect – even if not agreeing with – diverse perspectives.
- Provide participants with the opportunity and encourage them to develop positive relationships with one another, relationships of mutual respect and understanding.

### Critical Thinking & Awareness

- Develop participants' ability to think more critically and complexly about issues relevant to identity and communication.
- Allow participants to gain understanding of the perspectives/narratives of others – not only the positions taken or the opinions expressed, but specifically the underlying emotions, assumptions, values, biases, social norms and experiences that shape these positions.
- Help participants develop a clearer understanding of their own perspective, and develop an awareness of the emotions, assumptions, values, biases, social norms as well as one's personal relationship with the issues.
- Allow participants to explore how their identity impacts the way they view and approach the world, and how they communicate with those with different perspectives.

### Activation

- Develop a long-term interest in cross-cultural communication and engagement with different perspectives, values and cultures.
- By the end of the program, participants have the ideas, skills, tools, and opportunities to engage constructively across difference.
- Participants feel responsible to engage with difference cooperatively.

These goals are closely related to *21st century skills* that provide participants necessary competencies to thrive in today's interconnected world. These competencies and abilities are of critical importance also in today's education in all levels - also in higher education.

In the process of dialogue, skill building is tied to *attitude development*, which enables and motivates an individual to develop their capacity to participate in constructive communication and meaningful engagement, such as joint problem solving.

Attitudes such as empathy, open mindedness, curiosity and critical awareness are significant in enabling participants to transcend the perspective of their own cultural and personal contexts, and create a positive change in their communication abilities.