



Intercultural Dialogue Through Simulation and Virtual Exchange in Education

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Abstract. The study presents partial results of the project Simulation+Virtual Exchange 2021 (Sim+VE 2021). This project successfully brought together students from a course on teacher training from the Catholic University of Valencia (UCV) in Spain with student teachers, in-service teachers and academicians from various universities in Spain, Tunisia, Austria, Romania, USA, Argentina, Canada, Netherlands and UK. The simulation ‘The School of Valtance’ was carried out for eight weeks by synchronous and asynchronous virtual exchanges. Using simulation as a methodological strategy, high quality education was continued through virtual exchanges and the application of simulation in a digital environment. Thus, this paper is a study of the school environments, doing thorough research and building intercultural dialogue between the professional agents participating in education. The positive results of the experience suggest that initiatives using simulation may challenge the policy-makers who perceive teacher education as a fairly closed experience of professional formation, rather than as global collaborative and lifelong learning.

Keywords: Simulation · Active listening · Intercultural dialogue · Classroom management · Cultural diversity · Educational challenges

1 Introduction

The study presented here gathers the most relevant insights of the academicians participating in the project Simulation+Virtual Exchange 2021 (Sim+VE 2021). Participants involved in education worked collaboratively in mixed international teams to solve some educational challenges collected in the simulation scenario, ‘The School of Valtance’ version 2. Pre-service teachers were given opportunities to develop and practice professional skills (assuming role profiles such as parents, special needs teacher, head of the school, language teacher and other colleagues) in a safe simulated environment [1]. This initiative makes perfect sense in teacher training since mistakes committed in a real-life environment are difficult to revert, most of the times. Through simulated environments in which reflective dialogue takes place (reflection-on-action), pre-service teachers have an opportunity to analyse their performance [2–5]. ‘This kind of repeated practice is not only possible but encouraged and can be accomplished without any harm to real adults or children’ [6].

The present project aligns with the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association, among others, to identify and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of dialogue within the framework of simulation (<https://www.hetl.org/>). In times of pandemic, we have attempted to extend this dialogue to other professionals abroad through virtual exchange as we have had to adapt to an online mode of teaching unexpectedly. Originally consisted of face-to-face dialogue practice and a more traditional classroom simulation, our course had no option but to be adapted entirely to a virtual mode [7]. It was the leading coordinators' initiative to enhance intercultural dialogue in teacher training through the transformation of this project into a large-scale simulation.

1.1 Intercultural Dialogue Through Simulation

In the face of the increasing diversity of society and multicultural classrooms, the White Paper on intercultural dialogue, 'Living together as equals in dignity' defines intercultural dialogue as:

a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others. Intercultural dialogue contributes to political, social, cultural and economic integration and the cohesion of culturally diverse societies. It fosters equality, human dignity and a sense of common purpose. It aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse world views and practices, to increase co-operation and participation (or the freedom to make choices), to allow personal growth and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for the other [8].

The document argues that coexisting with dignity will depend on our ability to promote mutual understanding for managing cultural diversity. Dialogue should be conceived as a collaborative process in which participants search for understanding rather than confronting [9, 10]. Dialogue involves active listening and the exercise of critical thinking and can reveal assumptions and biases for re-examination [11–14].

In Sim+VE 2021, intercultural dialogue has proved to be central to embrace educational issues from different contexts, personal experiences and realities. Testimonies from all the participants reveal the significance and impact of the learning about other educational systems, the way students learn better, strengths and limitations in each place. Training teachers for the future should comprise understanding and reflection from other educational realities as classrooms tend to be more and more multicultural.

Sim+VE 2021 addressed the communicative and international components in active dialogic interactions with agents of education worldwide in an effort to emulate a realistic school setting. In the proposed simulation, participants were actively involved to find solutions to certain educational problems or situations described in the scenario. They were exposed to reading material, audio-visual resources and recent online news to familiarise themselves with educational issues. They did research and proposed through ideas during the virtual exchanges.

1.2 Virtual Exchange

Broadly speaking, virtual exchange refers to online interactions comprising groups of learners/participants from other cultural contexts or geographical locations who carry out specific tasks as an integrated part of their educational programmes [13–15]. Through virtual exchange, people from diverse contexts are brought together in significant cross-cultural experiences. Due to the pandemic, many students were not able to have their international experience abroad. Therefore, in Sim+VE 2021, students from teaching degrees were offered an international experience by participating in an intercultural simulation through virtual exchange. The added value of the project was the voluntary participation of professionals from other levels of the educational strata such as school teachers and teacher trainers from universities. This collaborative intercultural dialogue facilitated by simulation and virtual exchange became an ideal pedagogical cluster in times of pandemic [7, 16, 17].

2 Method

The participants and the instruments to collect data in ‘The School of Valtance’ Version 2 are described below.

2.1 ‘The School of Valtance’ Version 2

‘The School of Valtance’ Version 2 is a revised version of ‘The National School of Valtance’ which describes a school environment and tackles educational issues that coincide with the participants’ professional expertise and training for the project [7]. Thus, this version addressed the following educational challenges for secondary education:

- Teaching methodologies in English as a Second Language (ESL): language teaching skills
- Classroom management
- Shared teaching through lesson study
- Literature, storytelling and drama in English
- Multiple modalities in teaching & assessing
- Crisis management: coping with crisis, online teaching (COVID19, ...)

The scenario fully describes the school project and the educational challenges to be worked on.

2.2 Participants

Mixed teams [$n = 16$] of 6–8 participants each of in-service teachers, academicians and pre-service teachers from faculties of education of Spain, Tunisia, Austria, Romania, USA, Argentina, Canada, Netherlands and UK were created. All of them volunteered to participate in the project. An international certification was offered to each in recognition of their participation.

2.3 Procedure

Data was collected through:

1. Microsoft Teams for recorded synchronous sessions
2. Linkr Education for asynchronous conversations per team
3. Dedoose 9.0 for the qualitative study

The procedure consisted of preparing mixed teams to participate in all the phases of simulation: briefing, simulation and debriefing (Table 1). The leading university (Catholic University of Valencia) was in charge of making the teams with the three figures represented in each: pre-service teachers, academicians and in-service teachers. Profile roles were assigned to the participants such as Head of the School, the Valtance English Department (ValED), the Valtance Pedagogical Advisory Board (ValPE), Service learning (SerVal), the Valtance Special Education (SpEd) and the Valtance Parent Association (ValPAR).

The leading university (Catholic University of Valencia) contacted other professionals from the above-mentioned universities to coordinate the briefing phase and find in-service teachers and pre-service teachers from abroad as volunteers to participate in Sim+VE 2021 (Fig. 1).

Research, team-making and simulation briefing constitute the initial phase. As in every simulation, participants not knowing the simulation scenario received guidance (instruction on simulation procedure, discussions on some educational topics) from their local university academicians. They did research on current educational topics such as teaching English as a second language, classroom management, lesson study, special needs in education, family and education and service learning. These discussions held at each place helped sharpen the simulation scenario ‘The School of Valtance’ Version 2.

The simulation phase comprised synchronous and asynchronous sessions. For the synchronous sessions, one session was formally scheduled every week in which teams got together via Microsoft Teams. Participants carried out the simulation by analysing the educational challenges in the scenario and discussing possible solutions. These sessions were recorded. For the asynchronous sessions, participants mostly used Linkr Education to post their views of some topics and share some reading or visual material with their team. Asynchronous sessions were agreed internally in each team though it was compulsory to participate at least twice a week. Some participants opted to use alternative tools such as Google Drive or OneDrive.

The simulation and debriefing phases were coordinated by the leading university in Spain (Table 2).

The preparation phase (finding participants, discussing educational issues and depicting educational challenges) was conducted from week 1 to week 4. This gave the academicians enough time to prepare the simulation scenario incorporating the suggestions after the discussions held at each place.

Week 5 to week 8 were devoted to the briefing, simulation and debriefing of the scenario. A qualitative analysis of the experts’ perceptions was conducted. The debriefing session in Week 8 was recorded in order to recall the scholars’ comments and transcribe

Table 1. Some teams in Sim+VE 2021.

PARTICIPANTS' NAMES & POSITION	CITY	E-MAIL	PROFILE	
Pre-service teacher	Valencia		1. Head of the School	TEAM 1
Pre-service teacher	Valencia		4. ValED, the Valtance English Department	
Academic	Tunis		2. ValPE, the Valtance Pedagogical Advisory Board	
In-service teacher	Tunis		4. ValED, the Valtance English Department	
Academic	Lancaster		4. ValED, the Valtance English Department	
In-service teacher	Cluj-Napoca		5. SerVal: Service learning	
Pre-service teacher	Chicago, IL		6. SpEd: the Valtance Special Education	
Academic	Netherlands		3. ValPAR, the Valtance Parent Association	
Pre-service teacher	Valencia		1. Head of the School	TEAM 2
Pre-service teacher	Valencia		4. ValED, the Valtance English Department	
Academic	Tunis		2. ValPE, the Valtance Pedagogical Advisory Board	
In-service teacher	Tunis		3. ValPAR, the Valtance Parent Association	
In-service teacher	London		4. ValED, the Valtance English Department	
Academic	Cluj-Napoca		5. SerVal: Service learning	
Pre-service teacher	Valencia		1. Head of the School	TEAM 3
Academic	Valencia		4. ValED, the Valtance English Department	
Pre-service teacher	Tunis		3. ValPAR, the Valtance Parent Association	
In-service teacher	Tunis		4. ValED, the Valtance English Department	
In-service teacher	Argentina		5. SerVal: Service learning	
Pre-service teacher	Cluj-Napoca		2. ValPE, the Valtance Pedagogical Advisory Board	

*Details of participants have been omitted for anonymity.

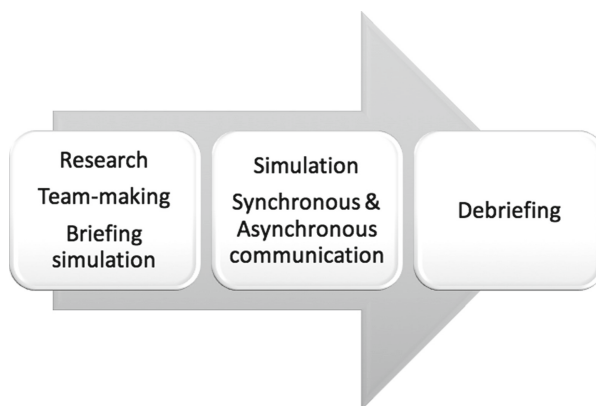
**Fig. 1.** Simulation procedure for Sim+VE 2021

Table 2. Sessions organization

Dates	Tasks
Week 1 to Week 3 (February 10th –24th)	Specialized literature analysis, discussion and exemplification
Week 4 March 3rd	Virtual Exchange 1. Synchronous Meeting only with academicians: Simulation scenario discussion and adaptations Mixed Teams making
Week 5 March 10th	Virtual Exchange 2. Synchronous Meeting: Briefing+Getting to know each other
Week 6 March 17th	Scenario analysis Profiles assignment Virtual Exchange 3. Synchronous Meeting: Simulation ‘The National School of Valtance’
Week 7 March 24th	Virtual Exchange 4. Synchronous Meeting: Simulation ‘The National School of Valtance’
Week 8 March 31st	Virtual Exchange 5. Synchronous Meeting: Debriefing by experts. Recorded session. Transcription and analysis for the qualitative study

them for the study. University teachers’ feedback was first classified into initial categories and subcategories until saturation of the data. The main conceptual categories were defined and analysed with the software application Dedoose version 9.

3 Results

The qualitative study yielded two main conceptual categories: intercultural dialogue (sub-categories: cultural differences and language restraints); and simulation interaction (sub-categories: content-knowledge and anxiety).

3.1 Intercultural Dialogue

The success of the project is closely associated with the commitment of the academicians at each place, most of whom have wide experience in intercultural communication and virtual exchange. Through the integration of simulation and virtual exchange, the dialogue was rich enough to elucidate different aspects of education which are conditioned by the participants’ expertise and culture. Some participants’ testimonies are:

- *I found it very thrilling. Lots of ideas about the simulation topics. There were some cultural differences that are harder to bridge in a short visit just as there would be if I, as an American educator teaching in a densely populated urban county would have if I was talking briefly with a teacher in a different city in another State in the US. But overall the issues with my European counterparts were the same dilemmas of practice. (A7)*

- *The simulation provided a great opportunity for all participants to share their concerns about their educational realities, and to build off of one another to provide adequate solutions. The variety of members in each team was especially interesting, as it allowed for a good range of discussion. (A15)*
- *I really liked the experience though in my team there was quite a lot of debate around, lesson study. Observers are allowed into the classroom in places such as Austria, UK, USA, etc. However, in some other countries, this is totally forbidden. A good discussion was held around the regulations in each country, the pros and cons of more conservative systems. (A16)*

This international dimension through simulation and virtual exchange has brought a unique value as it allowed participants to broaden their professional horizons without the need to travel while acquiring intercultural knowledge and communication skills. Participants highly valued the possibility to practice a second/foreign language as their feedback indicates:

- *Pre-service teachers in my team found some difficulties expressing their ideas, probably due to their level of English. However, they acted as true professionals, they participated in the discussions and used the chat and online translator when they occasionally got stuck with an idea. It did not affect the conversation. (A2)*
- *Dialogue was fluent and the level of English was fine, although I found most of the discussion based on opinions. I would have liked the participants to support their ideas more on the previous preparation they received or the specialized literature studied. (A17)*
- *The academicians had a very active role in my team. We had agreed on listening to the analysis of the different problems by the rest of participants, school teachers and practice teachers. We were surprised by the clear and sound understanding of the situations in spite of the lack of teaching experience of some of the participants. (A9)*

Two relevant aspects can be analysed from these testimonies. First, to be able to participate in a simulation or international event based on active communication, it is necessary to have a good command of the target language (English). This communication practice may stimulate participants to speak up their minds or may hinder them from collaborating with their opinions and knowledge simply because they lack a good command of the language. It is important to bear this in mind when making the teams. Initial interviews to detect participants' level of English should be conducted to properly make mixed-level teams and guarantee participation.

Second, to make the most out of the simulation experience, it is important to educate the ability to listen to each other. All participants should be taught multi-partiality to avoid mental triggers during the preparation and briefing phase. When triggered, participants have a hard time hearing what the person is actually trying to say because they may give more attention to those who speak more fluently or those they agree more with. In the study, academicians were more aware of this and acted as monitors, letting everyone participate and feel heard and represented.

3.2 Simulation Interaction

Most academicians highlighted the great value of simulations to tackle educational issues as their testimonies recall:

- *It was really beneficial to share different points of views about the educational delivery worldwide in order to try to improve it in the future. (A3)*
- *I am so happy to have such a chance and I definitely would do it again! All the participants are professional and confident and have a wonderful view on education! (A6)*
- *The simulation confirmed that all our student teachers struggle with similar issues on their journey to become teachers. All the teachers I participated with brought their full smart, empathetic, generous spirit to the dilemmas of practice. I appreciated their authentic, curious questions. Bravo to all of the teacher candidates that participated. (A7)*

The academicians observed that most participants found the simulation beneficial. The fact that they could speak with other professionals of education was something unique in itself. Most found an inner drive to perform their profile role very naturally. A few cases showed anxiety and nervousness. For most participants, the simulation was something new and was totally inexperienced. Yet, for a small group of participants, the simulation resulted in a problem more than an opportunity to share and learn. The schedule was tight and the preparation of the scenario may have demanded extensive research. As some scholars indicated, this anxiety was perceived during the first virtual exchanges (Weeks 4 and 5) and the synchronous session in the simulation (Week 6). After the participants got into the dynamics and trust was built among participants, the rest of the sessions ran smoothly for everyone.

4 Discussion

The integration of simulation and virtual exchange helped participants engage in intercultural dialogue conducive to learning. With this proposal, the strengths and weaknesses for an intercultural dialogue within the framework of simulation and virtual exchange were identified. An underpinning strength is the possibility offered to the participants, especially students from Spain, to successfully achieve the objectives of the Master Programme.

A true commitment of the academicians in each university made the experience possible and highly beneficial to all participants. As some recalled, they could practice English in a professional context. However, in such large scale projects, language restraints may hinder participants from achieving effective communication. In the case of Sim+VE 2021, only some participants found some limitations that could be solved with the assistance of other team members and technological tools (online translators). This should be taken into account when making teams in order to guarantee active participation. The difficulties expressing ideas may boost ‘mental noise’ or ‘triggers’ in some participants. In highly communicative-based activities, language problems may

occur such as hearing what the person is actually trying to say or overly-active listening when someone plans a response without attention to the communications of other participants. It is important to teach and provide enough practice on how to listen and avoid mental triggers before the participants are engaged in the simulation. This could be a long process and the guarantee of success may rely on the effective guidance of the facilitators. This applies to anxiety management during the simulation. Anticipated practice and control over the content by thorough research should help participants better manage emotions during simulation interactions.

Finally, this collaborative intercultural experience enhanced by the integration of simulation and virtual exchange becomes an ideal strategy to foster interaction between students and educators worldwide and promote the internationalisation of higher education. Using simulation may well challenge the many policy-makers who still see teacher education as a closed experience of professional formation rather than as the starting point for global collaborative and lifelong learning which should characterize a twenty-first century teacher's career.

The results may be extrapolated to other fields in higher education. Faculties of Business Administration of Spain, Tunisia and Canada will carry out Virtual exchange + simulation in the course 2021–2022. Participants will work in international virtual teams in the identification of challenges that affect their different communities. Likewise, the faculties of law of Spain and Italy will work in international virtual teams comparing judicial systems and applying them through simulations.

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