



## **Pedagogical Mentoring During Virtual Exchange: What Can We Learn from Critical Incidents?**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we explore the degree to which pedagogical mentoring during a three-country virtual exchange supported the development of lingua-technocultural competence among participants during the virtual exchange. To do so, we examine three incidents which resulted in varying degrees of success following pedagogical mentoring.

We conclude that a sole focus on developing lingua-technocultural competence during pedagogical mentoring, while helpful in some situations, was not sufficient in dealing with every critical incident. The reasons for this include an overarching emphasis on cognitive processes and insufficient time and focus on the development of emotional empathy. In addition, several features of virtual exchange may hinder the development of true empathy including the tasks students are required to complete as well as an insistence on a neutral facilitator role for the VE practitioners, which does acknowledge that they themselves are products of the social, political and historical forces that shape their own contexts.

*Keywords:* virtual exchange, telecollaboration, critical incidents, pedagogical mentoring

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## Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE), also known as Telecollaboration or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), can be defined as “the sustained engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interaction and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes” (O’Dowd, et al, 2020, pp. 146-147). As a pedagogical practice intended to support the development of key skills among university students, VE has been the object of both small scale and large scale studies. Within language related disciplines, this has included not only the development of target language skills and knowledge (Lee & Sauro, 2021) but also the development of intercultural competence, or the skills and attitudes needed to communicate effectively and appropriately with others from different cultures (Deardorff, 2006). The inherently online nature of VE, which requires the use of different communication technologies, has also made it a rich site for the development of the digital skills necessary to communicate and collaborate interculturally (e.g., The EVALUATE Group, 2019; EVOLVE Project Team, 2020). This merging of technology, culture and language to bring together students from different cultures and contexts therefore calls upon the development of lingua-technocultural competence to negotiate the critical incidents that will inherently arise.

### *Lingua-Technocultural Competence and Virtual Exchange*

Lingua-technocultural competence (Sauro & Chapelle, 2017) encompasses the abilities and knowledge digital users must develop to successfully negotiate the complex and continually shifting ways that digital technologies mediate the linguistic and cultural competence required in online intercultural environments. The term itself incorporates the concept of languaculture, which recognizes the inseparability of language and culture in the study of foreign languages (Chun, 2017) while also recognizing the influence both language and cultural norms play on how and which digital tools and communication technologies are used in different situations. The term also encompasses the reciprocal influence of the technology itself, through the affordances (e.g., the 280-character limit for a Tweet) or rules and terms governing a digital platform or tool (e.g. Twitter's prohibition against impersonating others for the purpose of deception), on the language and practices of users.

An example of the importance of this multi-pronged skillset in online communication is reported in Sauro and Sundmark (2019) who explored the choices made by a class of university students of English who were required to write and publish online fanfiction, a form of transformative storytelling. Students who chose to publish their story in a popular fanfiction archive carefully incorporated tags, ratings, warnings and summaries as allowed and encouraged by the archive platform with the hope of drawing engagement and even comments from online fans. They were, however, unsuccessful. After reflection and a careful reading of other similar fanfiction that did elicit engagement, the students came to the realization that despite employing the affordances of the platform optimally and ensuring their English matched that of other fanfiction and the source text, they had not written a story that was sufficiently imaginative or fantasy-fulfilling to match the expectations of fans. In this instance, while appearing to have successfully applied the language and technology components of lingua-technocultural competence, they had not sufficiently understood or met the norms for fantasy storytelling held by this online community to gain engagement and interaction.

In the context of VE, lingua-technocultural competence can be called upon as a result of not only the different digital tools used for communication and collaboration but also due to the different habits, language norms, and values associated with these technologies in the different partner classes. This might include, for instance, something as simple as different norms for having cameras on or off during recorded video calls and the corresponding problem-solving that will be called upon to mediate comprehension, confusion or even conflict (e.g. enabling subtitling of conversations, relying on simultaneous texting using emojis to convey enthusiasm and interest when faces are not visible.)

However, participating in VE does not in itself ensure positive learning outcomes, including students' development of lingua-technocultural competence, nor does it guarantee meaningful interaction with others (Kramsch, 2014). Lawrence and Spector-Cohen (2018) stress the complexity of VE and the necessity to actively explore and work through critical incidents, rich points and the assumptions that are held by both participants and teachers. Likewise, as illustrated in O'Dowd et al. (2020), teachers<sup>1</sup> can facilitate students' development of lingua-

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, we use teacher, facilitator, instructor and practitioner interchangeably to reflect the different formats and structures of VEs that exist and the role ascribed to the people who design and lead them.

technocultural competence through pedagogical mentoring, particularly in response to critical incidents that regularly arise during VE. They define pedagogical mentoring as “the strategies and techniques that teachers use in their classes to support students’ learning during virtual exchange projects” (p. 147). Furthermore, they point out that pedagogical mentoring can take place before the VE begins by, for example, raising awareness of effective online communication strategies; by leading and modeling online interactions during the exchange; and by examining critical incidents through integration of participants’ online interactions into class work and discussion.

### ***Critical Incidents***

One of the well-described characteristics of VE is the opportunity for learning to arise in response to confusion or misunderstandings that come about due to the different culturally situated norms of students in the different partner classes. In intercultural learning, such a scenario has been referred to as a critical incident, defined as "a communication situation, which the participants (or one participant) consider as problematic and confusing, even amusing. Critical incidents are occasions that stay in mind" (Working Group, University of Jyväskylä, 2013). Accordingly, critical incidents can serve as tools or opportunities for supporting awareness, understanding and even acceptance of attitudes, behaviors and interactional norms and have a rich history as an educational tool to support cross-cultural competence (Apedaile & Schill, 2008).

An example of this can be seen in O'Dowd et al. (2020) who explore a critical incident in a VE which took the form of a multilayered misunderstanding and conflict that was exacerbated by the particular communication technology being used and by one group of students' misreading of the intended meaning of another group of students at a different university. With the support of the course instructors who provided pedagogical mentoring, the students were able to identify the misunderstanding and strategize ways to understand each other's positions and repair the communication. Through this process, they came to appreciate not only the limitations of certain digital technologies for communication and collaboration but also developed an awareness of different ways of expressing themselves in English to support understanding and reduce conflict. While this example illustrates a successful learning outcome arising from a critical incident due in part to the pedagogical mentoring of the VE instructors, not all pedagogically mentored responses

to critical incidents are equally successful in supporting empathy, awareness and intercultural understanding or acceptance.

The goal of this study is to therefore examine different instances of pedagogical mentoring in response to critical incidents from a single VE that culminated in varied levels of success in order to understand what might have led to these more and less successful outcomes.

## **Methods**

### ***Context and Participants***

This study was carried out in the context of a three-country teacher education VE partnership among language teacher training classes in Israel, Spain, and Sweden. The partnership was conducted in English over six weeks. The levels of English language proficiency for most participants ranged from B2 to C2 on the CEFR scale. The VE also included a few participants in each context whose first language happened to be English.

Students were organized into six transnational teams of six to nine students, consisting of two to three members from each of the partner classes. In total 63 students participated in the VE, and the data reported in this study were generated by the 43 students who consented to sharing their data for research: four students from Israel, 31 students from Spain, and eight students from Sweden.

This exchange was also part of two concurrent European projects or programs that were investigating the use of VE: the EVOLVE project (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange) which aimed to assess learning outcomes that resulted from VE across a range of disciplines in higher education, and Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, a program focused on using VE to bring together young people in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to foster intercultural understanding in both formal and informal educational contexts. Accordingly, this VE incorporated both pre- and post-VE questionnaires for students to evaluate their expectations and learning as well as facilitated discussions, a small group video-conference discussion facilitated by a trained facilitator who was not one of the three teachers on a topic selected by the three partner teachers (empathy). As a result of participating in these projects/programs, students were aware of the significance of VE and their particular partnership for research and social purposes.

### ***Tasks and Technologies for Interaction***

As part of this VE, the six transnational groups completed a sequence of three tasks developed as part of involvement in a prior project (The EVALUATE Group, 2019) which first asked students to get to know each other and decide on group norms (Task 1), then guided them to compare and synthesize perspective on the use of technology for language teaching (Task 2), and finally required that they collaborate on the development of teaching materials that could be used in all three partners' teaching contexts. Building upon a prior partnership following a similar task sequence (see O'Dowd et al., 2020), all transnational teams were provided with access to a Moodle site and its discussion forums for submitting the outcome of each task but were also encouraged to identify both synchronous and asynchronous digital tools that each group could use to collaborate and develop their final answers for each task. Technologies varied across these six groups with all six using Google docs, to support collaborative writing, with two groups relying on email to update one another and four groups using the chat application WhatsApp for more immediate interaction. In addition, groups also selected a free video-conferencing tool (either ZOOM or Slack) to facilitate at least one synchronous meeting of all group members.

### ***Data, Coding and Analysis***

Data for this study consisted of two main types: from the instructors, this included analytical memos and emails which were collated in response to critical incidents students brought to the instructors. These were compiled chronologically into Google documents based on each critical incident. From the students, this consisted of emails, discussion forum posts and entries in reflective portfolios that referenced the focal critical incidents. These entries included not only students' reflections but also screen grabs of planning and interaction between the groups that inspired or occurred during the critical incidents identified by the students.

### **Results and Discussion**

We explore the varying degrees of success and levels of awareness arising in response to pedagogical mentoring through three vignettes, each tied to a separate critical incident.

#### ***Vignette 1: The Tale of the Kiss Emoji***

The first critical incident occurred in transnational group 4, which, according to its members, was quite a friendly group with pleasant interaction; no conflicts or negative emotions were reported by its members throughout the VE. Their main challenge, according to some of the participants, was making sure that tasks were completed on time, but they were getting better at this as they progressed.

The friendliness among members of the group was marked by generous use of emojis on WhatsApp as well. Following a report in class of a rather humorous critical incident involving an emoji, the instructor of the Swedish group sent an email to her colleagues:

*One evening, a [Spanish] member of one of the other classes closed out an interaction with one of my students on whatsapp with a kiss emoji. Suddenly my student was stressed because she was faced with a difficult dilemma. Did she have to kiss her back? My student says she only sends kisses to close friends, but this was a group member and this whatsapp chat was more professional. However, if she didn't send a kiss back, what other emoji could she send? A basic smiley? What if that made her group member sad to get just a basic smiley in response to a kiss? My student didn't want to make anyone sad, so she sent a kiss emoji back, put down her phone, and left the room because she couldn't handle seeing what her group member sent back. In the end, it turned out okay, no more stressful emojis, but this encounter left an impression on my student. (Email, instructor of Swedish group).*

In his response to the email, the instructor from Spain pointed out that: *"Spanish kiss on WhatsApp all the time. It comes from "un beso" which is a common way of saying goodbye."*

The instructors then discussed this amusing critical incident with their respective classes. They stressed that the kiss emoji is an example of how technology practice is a reflection of linguistic and cultural norms that vary from society to society. Specifically, the kiss emoji is tied to the visual representation of goodbye in Spanish, whereas in other cultures it may be perceived as, for example, a romantic or intimate gesture. The humorous yet insightful nature of this critical incident was mirrored in a Swedish student's comment at the end of the class discussion: *"I only kiss after the third task!"*

As seen through class discussion and the students' portfolios, this critical incident was resolved successfully. The focus on developing the students' lingua-technocultural competence had enabled them to understand the different culturally-situated uses of emojis in digital spaces.

In fact, as a result of the incident, the partner instructors themselves increased the use of emojis with each other in their own WhatsApp correspondence, acknowledging that they too had developed awareness of the (often fun and amusing) role that emojis can play in digital communication.

### ***Vignette 2: What's with all the Code Switching?***

The second critical incident began to unfurl during a class discussion in the Swedish class. Students in two of the transnational groups described confusing situations that occurred when their respective transnational groups met via Zoom for a synchronous meeting. In the first incident, one of the students from Israel, a native Arabic speaker, was late for the meeting. When he joined the Zoom session (apparently when walking through a shopping mall), his classmate from Israel, also a native speaker of Arabic, filled him in on what he had missed in Arabic, as the other participants listened in. In another group, students from Spain were sharing a computer during their Zoom session and from time to time chatted among themselves in Spanish, again in front of their transnational partners. These two incidents of code switching were perceived as quite rude by the Swedish students, and in an email to her colleagues the instructor from Sweden wrote, *"This led to a conversation about language norms...I asked if they had considered that things might be different in Spain or Israel or the other countries students are from."*

The Swedish instructor's message led to an email discussion among the three instructors. The instructor from Spain pointed out that: *"There isn't much code switching in León at all. People are very Spanish in the sense that they use Spanish all the time. There is very little use of English here on a day to day basis."* The Israeli instructor went on to explain that since Israel is a multicultural, multilingual country, it is not unusual to hear a variety of languages spoken in public spaces. She went on to note that in most cases codeswitching is tolerated (and even encouraged, for example for language maintenance) and *"it's just not an issue to hear different languages around you."*

The instructors decided to hold a pedagogical mentoring session in their respective classes on the topic of lingua-technocultural competence and cultural differences in code switching. They stressed that different cultural norms exist for code switching and using additional languages, and that these norms mediate languages used in technology and virtual spaces. In their discussions, the



instructors tried to elicit possible explanations for the use of code switching to promote greater understanding and empathy among their students. For example, the two Arabic-speakers might have decided to code switch in the interest of saving time for the entire group, since it was the most efficient and quick way of bringing the late student up to par. In addition, the two students might have been embarrassed to use English for this purpose in front of the other participants. Furthermore, the latecomer might have been in a shopping mall because he had connectivity issues at home. The instance of Spanish students sharing computers for synchronous work exposed the other participants to another culture's socially situated practices of code switching (speaking Spanish among themselves but English among others). In other words, people were just doing "what's normal" for them.

The instructors reported satisfaction with their sessions, and felt that through spirited and open discussion, their students gained new insights. They were optimistic that this newfound awareness would result in increased empathy for such behaviors in the future.

However, on closer inspection after the VE was over, the mentoring sessions may have raised awareness regarding cultural practices, but did not develop empathy and acceptance on the part of some of their students, as seen through the following portfolio excerpts:

*"...there was a moment in which ... [the two Arabic-speaking students in the Israeli group] started to talk in their own language during a few minutes. We did not want to be rude and tell them to change to English, but maybe we should have done it in a polite way."* (portfolio, student from group 2 from Spain)

*"...They also spoke to each other in Spanish quite a few times during the call, which frankly seemed unnecessary since they all know English, and it is a little bit rude since we could all hear them speaking but were unable to understand them."* (portfolio, student from group 7 from Sweden)

Upon further reflection, perhaps the expectation that students would show increased empathy and understanding after one pedagogical mentoring session was unrealistic. Empathy is a multidimensional construct, involving both cognitive and emotional processes. According to Martingano and Konrath (2022), cognitive empathy involves "understanding others' thoughts and feelings without necessarily reacting emotionally" (p. 144), while emotional empathy relates to "experiencing emotions in response to others' emotional experiences or expressions" (p. 144).

Whether intentional or not, the pedagogical mentoring that took place during this critical incident might have been focused less on developing empathy and more on a ‘teaching moment’, i.e. on *rationality*: “a tendency to make slower, elaborated, and cognition-based decisions” and “which operates at a conscious level and is intentional, [and] analytical” (Wang et al., 2017). The relationship between empathy and rationality has been debated in the literature and is beyond the scope of this paper, but in a recent meta-analysis examining this issue, Martingano and Konrath (2022) found tentative support for *dual-process models* of empathy, which stipulate that cognitive empathy involves more rational processes than emotional empathy. Therefore, one could hypothesize that there would be a positive relationship between cognitive empathy and rational thinking, but either no or even a negative association between emotional empathy and rational thinking.

Perhaps this more rational approach to pedagogical mentoring involving a one-time discussion or ‘teaching moment’ did not give the participants enough time and experience to fully develop empathy. This is especially true regarding emotional empathy, which can be subdivided into components that vary in the degree of orientation to the self: *empathic concern*, *emotion contagion*, and *personal distress* (Martingano and Konrath, 2022):

*“Empathic concern is focused on other people’s experiences, whereas personal distress captures a propensity to have self-focused emotional reactions. Emotional contagion is equally focused on the self and the other, namely, it involves a sense of emotional fusion or mirroring of others’ emotions. Self-report measures of empathic concern and personal distress are generally negatively correlated (Davis, 1983), and have different relationships with prosocial behavior (Eisenberg et al., 1989)”* (p. 144).

In hindsight, it appears that some of the comments in the student portfolios focused more on their own reactions (*personal distress*) than on their partners’ experiences (*empathic concern*). Therefore, in line with the *dual-process models* of empathy, the pedagogical mentoring, with its emphasis on rational ‘teaching’, may have been somewhat successful in promoting cognitive empathy but much less so regarding emotional empathy.

Furthermore, it could be that the task design of the VE, which focused more on action-oriented pedagogical tasks than on intercultural reflexivity, was a contributing factor for the lack

of empathy seen in some of the comments in the student portfolios. The pedagogical mentoring took place in the participants' respective classrooms, but the project did not give them space to reflect together with their partners once they had completed the task in which the critical incident occurred. Indeed, Reljanovic Glimäng (2022) proposes that VE task design should focus on "social change through action-oriented tasks but where critical and dialogic reflection *after* the completion of a pedagogical task is the salient part" (p. 61).

Taking the above-mentioned issues together, this could explain why pedagogical mentoring had moderate success at best for this particular critical incident.

### ***Vignette 3: All Aboard the Hot Mess Express***

The third critical incident, which the instructors have come to refer to as the *Hot Mess Express* is an example where pedagogical mentoring, despite alleviating a surface-level problem, failed to address larger underlying issues that were at the root of the actual conflict and which only became clear after the conclusion of the VE, when the instructors compared insights gleaned from their respective students' portfolios. We share this failed critical incident here as an example of ways in which pedagogical mentoring can fail to support increased understanding, collaboration and learning among students, discuss possible explanations for this failure and conclude with guidelines for how teachers can head off such potential failed critical incidents in their own VEs.

The instructors were first made aware of this critical incident through a student email complaining of the behavior of one of the members of group 1 from Israel.

*"I wake up every single day, since Saturday, to find I have received one or two emails from her, and I receive more emails as each day goes by. I feel like she has been putting too much pressure on me: first, because of her insistence over cell numbers, and second, because she has been treating me as if I was the responsible for the Spanish group 1, and she has been saying that we have left the Israeli group out of the activities, that we do not want to count with them to do the tasks, and that have made me feel really bad."* (Extract from email, student from group 1 from Spain)

Follow-up correspondence with other students in the group from Spain and Sweden confirmed this tension around the type of technology to use (i.e. WhatsApp or Facebook) for more instant communication than was supported by the Moodle platform. While the students in Israel

avored using WhatsApp, a tool that required sharing phone numbers, the students in Spain preferred using Facebook, which did not require sharing phone numbers but which did bring work into a more personal online environment which the students from Israel did not feel comfortable with. Of particular concern to the three instructors was the fact that this tension over technology seemed to be leading to a divide between the students from Israel and those from Spain and Sweden, the latter of which had already formed a Facebook group. The instructor of the Swedish class counseled one of her students to reset the conversation with a frank post to the Moodle discussion board to clear the air and elicit suggestions for alternate communication tools that students from all three classes felt equally comfortable using:

*"From what I've gathered, members from Sweden and Spain are opposed to using What'sApp because they dislike the idea of sharing their cellphone number.... Naturally, I also understand that the members from Israel are opposed to using Facebook, due to Facebook being a personal social platform, etc, which is completely understandable. However, what I do, and I do so strongly, oppose myself to, is this tug-of-war, instead of actually trying to find a solution together. "* (Discussion forum post, student from Group 1 from Sweden)

The post elicited positive responses from many members of the group, including the eventually agreed upon alternate communication tool, Slack. The critical incident stemming from tensions around what technology to use thus appeared to have resulted in a productive resolution, or so the instructors believed.

However, indication that all was not resolved through this digital solution was found in the final task (a collaborative lesson plan activity), which this particular group struggled to develop. Student portfolios submitted at the end of the course revealed that Group 1 had continued to struggle with collaboration, leaving many with a negative perception not only of other members of their group but also of the potential for VE to be a meaningful learning experience:

*"From these experiences, I've also learnt that telecollaboration might be far too demanding to be justified. The practical aspects of a telecollaboration, at least in our case, might be somewhat unrealistic for it to result in a truly meaningful learning experience. There was simply too much frustration on many ends, that took away focus from what was important."* (Portfolio, Student from Group 1 Sweden)

While the pedagogical mentoring of the critical incidents with the kiss emoji and questions around code-switching resulted in new knowledge or deeper awareness of differences among the participants in the VE, pedagogical mentoring around this third critical incident resulted in the opposite.

### ***Where Pedagogical Mentoring Went Wrong***

The portfolios from Group 1 revealed that despite what the instructors had believed to be successful pedagogical mentoring had in fact failed. Only after the end of term and when the three instructors could compare portfolios did the extent and cause of this failure become evident. Analysis revealed three causes: (1) lack of information on the true origin of the conflict, (2) an overemphasis on technology as the solution, which avoided the examination of broader socio-political issues, and (3) overconfidence in the effectiveness of a single mentoring session to result in profound change.

### ***Lack of Information on the True Origin of the Conflict***

The initial email in the chain of events outlined above led the instructors to conclude that the origin of the conflict lay in the selection of the digital tool. It was only after the term had ended and when the instructors were able to share and compare portfolio responses from all their students, that more details emerged regarding the actual source of the tensions in Group 1, which preceded this.

Specifically, the initial conflict stemmed from a scheduling decision taken by members of the group which resulted in a planning meeting in which no members of the group from Israel were able to attend. This came to the attention of the instructors because as part of their portfolios, students were encouraged to include screen captures of text chat interactions or other planning. Figure 1 depicts a screen capture of the Doodle poll used to schedule the first planning meeting for Group 1. Although names have been excluded, the first three lines were the votes of the students in Israel. The date chosen to meet was November 24. Therefore, there was a conscious decision to exclude members of the Israeli group.

**Figure 1:** *Screen capture of the Doodle poll used to schedule the first meeting of Group 1, included in a portfolio from a student from Group 1 from Spain*

NOV 22 FRI	NOV 23 SAT	NOV 23 SUN	NOV 24 MON
12:00 14:00	12:00 14:00	17:00 18:00	12:00 14:00
✓ 8	✓ 6	✓ 7	✓ 6
✓	✓	✓	
		✓	
✓			
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓			✓
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓

The portfolio responses from a student from Israel revealed that this decision led to a feeling of being excluded and left out among the students from Tel Aviv University.

*"Our group felt left out and excluded. The other 2 groups chose a time and proceeded to meet without waiting to hear if we could meet them. It would have been understandable if one or two of us couldn't make the zoom call. However, they all spoke and set a time, not caring if we were part of the discussion or not."* (Portfolio, student from Group 1 from Israel)

### ***Offering Technological Solutions to Socio-Political Problems***

Where did pedagogical mentoring go wrong? Firstly, it was clear in hindsight that important information regarding the origin of the conflict was missing during the critical incident. Therefore, the instructors over-emphasized the technological aspect of the incident, directing students to understand and negotiate the different culturally-mediated digital practices of the respective members. Once the group members understood the marked differences in preferred technologies used in each country and found an alternative platform, Slack, the instructors believed that the issue had been resolved and that the group could move forward.

But was the lack of information regarding the origin of the incident the only cause of the failure of pedagogical mentoring? On closer inspection of the student email that alerted the instructors to a critical incident in group 1, the issue was not only of a technological nature: *"...she has been saying that we have left the Israeli group out of the activities, that we do not want to count with them to do the tasks, and that have made me feel really bad."* Unfortunately, the instructors (un)consciously chose to downplay the fact that the Israeli group perceived that they

had been excluded. Upon critical reflection, the instructors realized that their own assumptions, values and experiences had influenced their approach to mediating the conflict. For example, there was a real fear or uncertainty as to how to introduce broader socio-political issues that may have mediated the responses of different group members. The instructor from Israel, having experienced prejudice and exclusion herself in international contexts, including in VE, chose, perhaps in part due to wishful thinking, to downplay the assumption that her students were being excluded deliberately. This desire to look for other sources of conflict was further augmented by the limited familiarity and experience of the instructor from Sweden regarding deliberate exclusion and prejudices that could arise during international collaborations, and how to mediate them.

### ***Overconfidence in the Effectiveness of a Single Pedagogical Mentoring Session***

The nature of the critical incident required not only pedagogical mentoring to develop langua-technocultural competence, but also a form of conflict mediation. According to Bush and Folger's (1994) approach to conflict resolution, there are four notions of mediation. The aim of the first, *the satisfaction story*, is to try to resolve conflict by engaging the participants in problem-solving activities. The second, called *the transformation story*, focuses on developing empathy and the capacity for making decisions, while *the social justice story* sees mediation as a way to overcome societal oppression. Finally, *the oppression story* considers that conflict resolution may in fact be an instrument used to perpetuate inequalities. They further claim that an over-reliance on *the satisfaction story* can thwart true "tension and debate" (Hansen, 2008, p. 411).

The rather neutral and problem-solving approach to pedagogical mentoring taken by the instructors seemed to align with Bush and Folger's (1994) *satisfaction story*. However, taking on the role of a 'neutral' facilitator may be at times not only counterproductive, but unrealistic, as VE practitioners themselves (as well as the participants) are products of the social, political and historical forces that shape their own contexts, including those that are not immediately transparent. This is in line with Freire's (1997) concept of critical pedagogy and Hauck and Helm's (2020) call to create "a dialogic brave space" which enables participants to recognize differences and examine "uncomfortable issues linked to power, privilege, and inequality" (Reljanovic Glimäng, 2022, p. 72). When engaging in pedagogical mentoring, facilitators must critically reflect on their own assumptions, values and experiences with oppression and engage in honest dialogue with their partner practitioners. This ties in with Reljanovic Glimäng's (2022) call to design VE

tasks where the primary focus is creating a third space for critical reflection once the task has been completed. In this way, mediation would also involve focusing on developing empathy and the capacity for making decisions (*the transformation story*), as well as efforts to overcome societal conflict and oppression (*social justice story*).

## Conclusion

We conclude that a sole focus on developing lingua-technocultural competence during pedagogical mentoring may not be sufficient in dealing with every critical incident. This is in part because this approach, which seems to focus more on cognitive processes (i.e., ‘teaching opportunities’), may not provide participants with the critical time and experience needed to develop emotional empathy, particularly of the type that relates to the experiences of others. In addition, task design that “foregrounds critical intercultural reflexivity” by allowing for discussion *after* the action-oriented task has been completed might have attained better results (Reljanovic Glimäng, 2022, p. 78). Finally, taking on the role of a ‘neutral’ facilitator may at times be counterproductive, as VE practitioners are themselves products of the social, political and historical forces that shape their own contexts. When engaging in pedagogical mentoring, facilitators must critically reflect on their own assumptions, values and experiences with oppression and engage in honest dialogue with their partner practitioners.

We recommend therefore that when engaging in pedagogical mentoring during VE, teachers and practitioners do the following:

1. Pay greater attention to how they can promote not only their students' lingua-technocultural competence but their own as well.
2. Design tasks that foreground critical intercultural reflexivity by allowing for discussion after each action-oriented task has been completed. In this way, issues that otherwise might not be immediately transparent can be dealt with as they unfold.
3. Instead of having students submit a final portfolio at the end of the VE, have them submit relevant sections throughout.
4. Push through their own reticence to delve into the moments of greatest conflict that may arise. While there is a clear need for understanding and agreement for the purpose of



collaboration, the urgency to compromise for the purpose of completing a task can interfere with addressing deeper underlying issues that may eventually lead to a disappointing or even demoralizing experience for students. We argue, therefore, that pedagogical mentoring should incorporate strategies for conflict resolution.

5. Recognize that self-awareness, learning and lingua-technocultural competence may emerge well after the partnership has ended and when distance is achieved. On an optimistic note, months after this VE ended, several students in the third vignette reassessed their experience in the VE as being tough and stressful at the time but one of the more valuable learning experiences they had during their entire teacher education program.
6. Finally, we echo Brown (2021) who asks us to rethink empathy: "Rather than walking in your shoes, I need to learn how to listen to the story you tell about what it's like in your shoes and believe you even when it doesn't match my experiences" (p. 123). VE facilitators should be brave and willing to have difficult discussions with their partner teachers when one suspects the potential source of conflict may stem from prejudice, bigotry, racism, sexism, homophobia or other discriminatory practices, particularly when the teachers have been on the receiving end of such experiences. Partner teachers should be prepared to listen and trust in the experiences and observations of their colleagues, even when it may not match their own perspective.

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