Classes, Cultures? Connect!

Implementing and researching Virtual Exchange in Higher Education institutions

2ND ITERATION OF CO-LABORATORY TRAINING – EVALUATION REPORT

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evolve

Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is an output of the EVOLVE project (Evidence Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange), an Erasmus+ KA3 Forward-Looking Cooperation Project which aims to mainstream Virtual Exchange (VE) as innovative educational practice in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) across Europe. The intention of the EVOLVE team is to assist HE.

The following document reports on the results of the evaluation of the second iteration of Co-Laboratory training designed and delivered by EVOLVE training team to support HE educators and educational supporters in promoting, designing and launching their own class-to-class VE projects. To assure a shared understanding of what VE is, Virtual Exchange has been defined in the EVOLVE project as 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".

https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The major aim of the following report is to provide insight into the efficacy of the modifications implemented in the second iteration of Co-Laboratory training in response to the evaluation of the piloting edition.

For the results of the 1st EVOLVE training evaluation please refer to our website: https://evolve-erasmus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Training-evaluation-report-.pdf

The current report evaluates the 2nd, modified version of the training and focuses on the following:

- the participants' satisfaction with selected course components;
- the impact of the training on participants' confidence in dealing with technical, pedagogical and organizational aspects of VEs;
- participants' feedback on the relevance of course content, instruction and technologies
- the differences between the evaluation of 1st and 2nd iteration.

The data obtained in the process have been used to assure the final version of the training materials which are available to higher education institutions as open educational resources through the EVOLVE website:

EVALUATION METHODS

The data presented and analysed in this report were collected through an evaluation form created in English in Qualtrics and distributed online after the second iteration of the training, in the period between December 2019 and January 2020. The evaluation form entailed a collection of qualitative and quantitative data from 15 training participants. It mirrored the form distributed after the first training iteration in 2019 and, just like the previous version, consisted of 31questions investigating various aspects of the training.

OVERVIEW OF THE TRAINING

The 2nd training was delivered to a cohort of educators and internationalisation officers. Just as in the first iteration, the main target group were HE educators planning to implement class-to-class VE projects. To support them in launching their own projects, the training was designed and delivered with the following objectives in mind:

- demonstrating what Virtual Exchange (VE) is and how it can be implemented in specific institutional context;
- fostering participants' pedagogical competence;
- introducing different types of VE and the tasks used;
- making the participants acquire technological competence required for VE;
- assisting the participants in constructing a balanced task sequence for their own project;
- introducing the participants to the concept of Facilitated Dialogue;
- highlighting the value of reflection tasks.

The shape of the 2nd Co-Laboratory iteration was informed by the results of the first training evaluation. The modifications implemented in light of the findings involved a reduced number of modules and, with that, also reduced time needed to complete the training. It also resulted in a greater focus on collaborative activities and task orientation during weekly synchronous sessions.

The modified structure of the training includes 5 core modules pertaining into the following issues:

- The pedagogy of VE
- Task design and technology
- Introduction to facilitated dialogue
- Critical digital literacy
- Intercultural competence and VE

The picture below presents a screenshot of the training homepage with all the available modules:
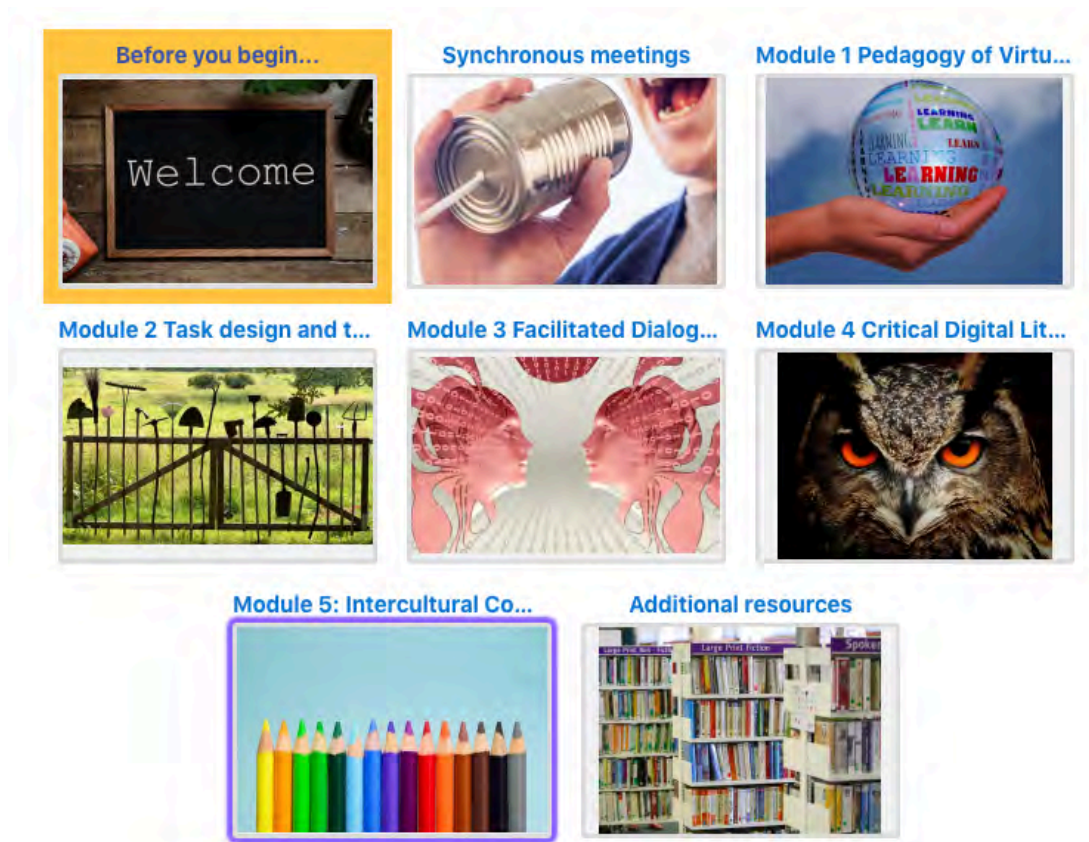

Fig.1 A screenshot of the Co-Laboratory homepage – titles of training modules.

The second iteration of Co-Laboratory training was delivered online through a Moodle-based platform hosted by OpenEdu and it took 5 weeks to complete. Some tasks and training activities were complemented with external online tools, such as videoconferencing software (Zoom.Us), video recording apps (Flipgrid) and other tools enhancing collaboration and communication (e.g. Padlet, Mahara, Google docs), which was supposed to serve as creative modelling for participants' own VE ideas.

As in the previous iteration, the training focused mostly on class-to class type of VE, with Facilitated Dialogues introduced, but not fully explored.

CO-LABORATORY PARTICIPANTS

The 2nd iteration of the Co-Laboratory training gathered a group of 30 registered participants representing 27 HE European institutions. 20 of the enrolled participants were actively throughout the course, while 12 received digital badges of completion.

The post-training evaluation form was responded to by 15 participants, 3 males and 12 females, whose responses provided data on which the current evaluation is based. Most of the participants were experienced educators reporting the scope of 11-20 and 6-10 years of practice (respectively 40% and 33%). The distribution of responses has been illustrated in Fig. 2:
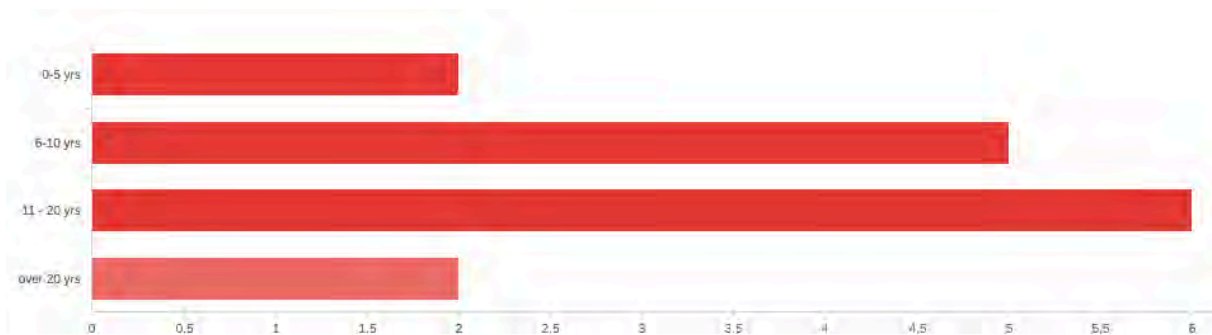
Fig. 2 Distribution of responses to Q 1: What is your professional experience in higher education?

The largest group of respondents were HE teachers and instructors (52%), with a relatively modest representation of teacher trainees (13%), curriculum developers (13%) and pedagogical advisors (only 8%). The distribution of all responses has been illustrated below:
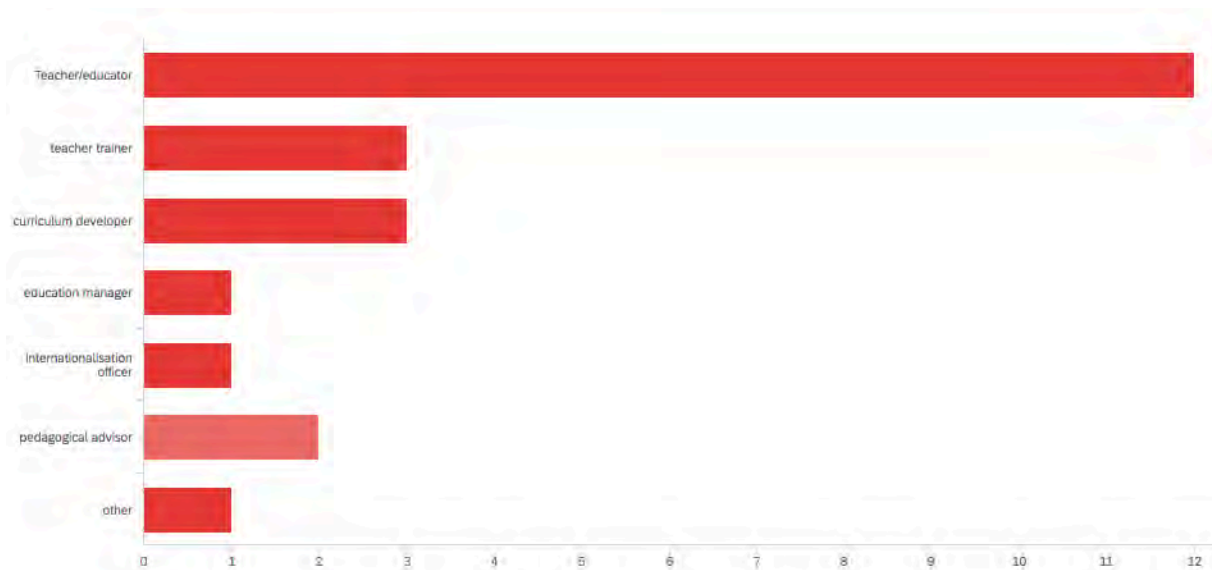

Fig. 3 Distribution of responses to Q 3: What is your role at your institution?

Interestingly, a relatively large group participants had previous VE experience which they *wanted to refine* (20.0%) and *share with colleagues* (13.3%). They also wanted to *fine tune their previously acquired VE competence* and to *be able to target particular learning outcomes in a more precise way* (18%). Indeed, this mature approach was reflected in the course of the training in participants' insightful comments and contributions to training tasks.
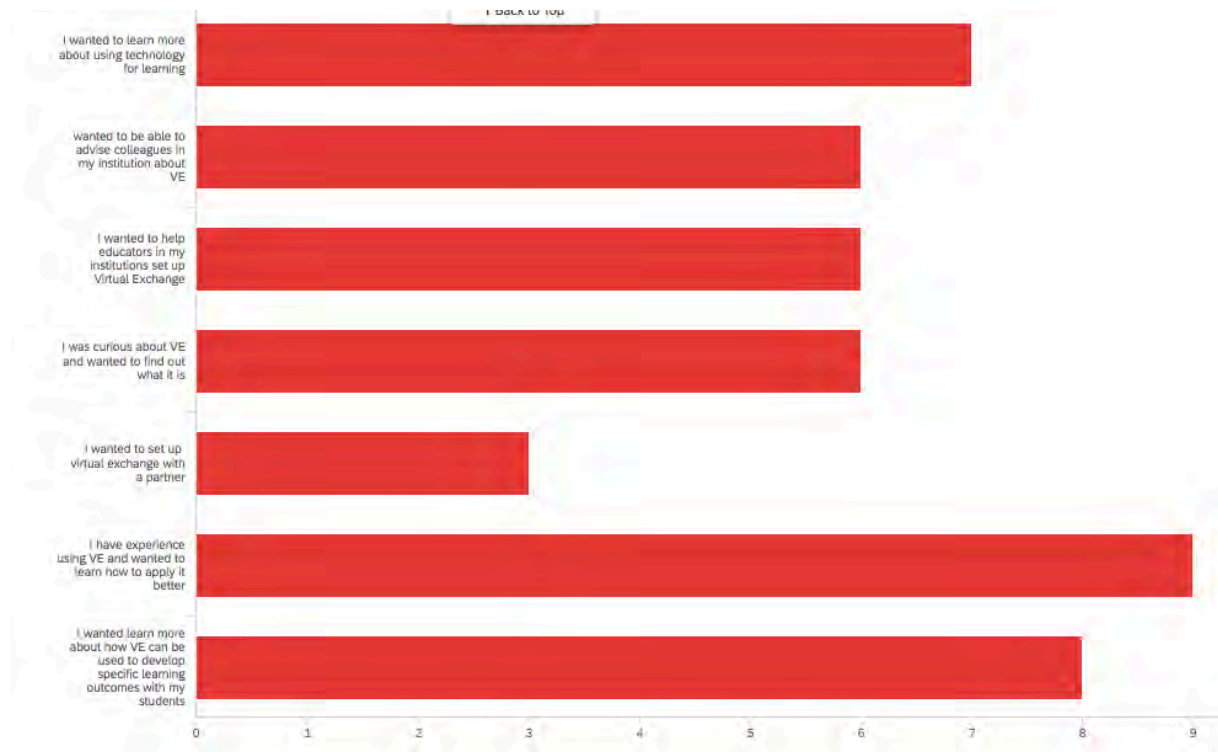
Fig. 4. Distribution of responses to Q5: What was the reason which best describes why you registered for the course? (select all that apply)

When asked for self-evaluation of their participation in the training, a large group of respondents perceived themselves as active training participants who either completed it (60.0%) or took part in the most of its activities and activities (26.67%). Only 2 respondents admitted to having started the training and having dropped out at point.
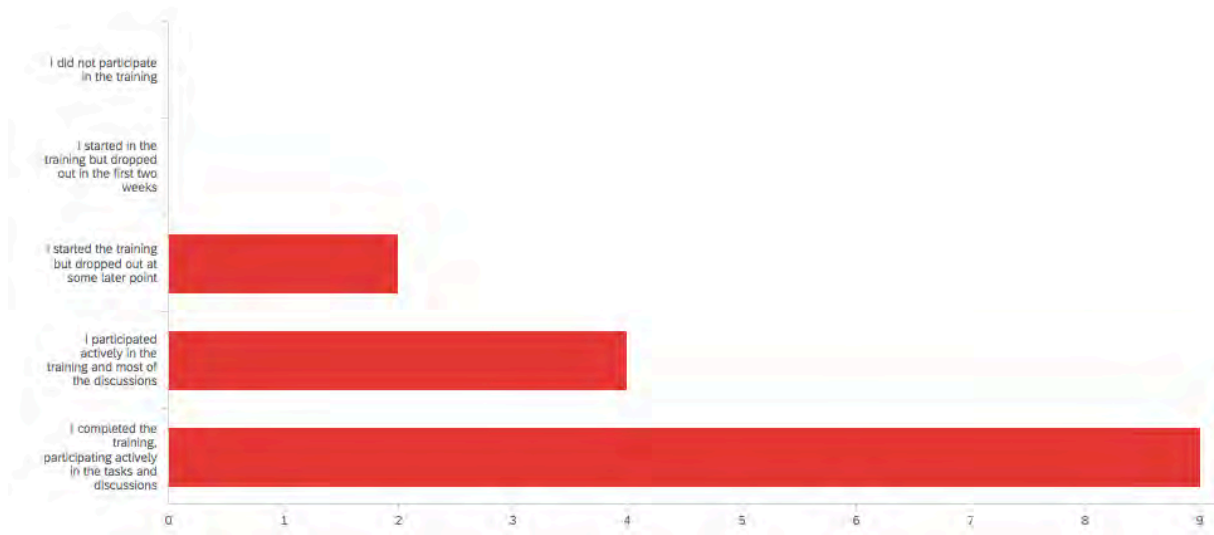
Fig. 5 Distribution of responses to Q 6: Which best describes your participation in the training?

TRAINING EVALUATION

The following evaluation presents the participants' feedback in the areas of

- overall training satisfaction
- course moderation
- course interaction and communication
- course content

OVERALL TRAINING SATISFACTION

The overall evaluation of respondents' training experience was very high. The majority of respondents admitted that participation in the training contributed, either highly (60%) or very highly (40%) to their overall understanding of VE. None of the respondents selected lower values, which confirms the alignment of the training with its intended objectives.

Fig. 6 Distribution of responses to Question 12: After having completed the course my overall understanding of Virtual Exchange is … .

A comparison of mean values calculated for iterations 1 & 2 of the training shows increase in almost all categories, especially:

- meeting participants' expectations (mean value 4.60 out of 5, increase by 0.60
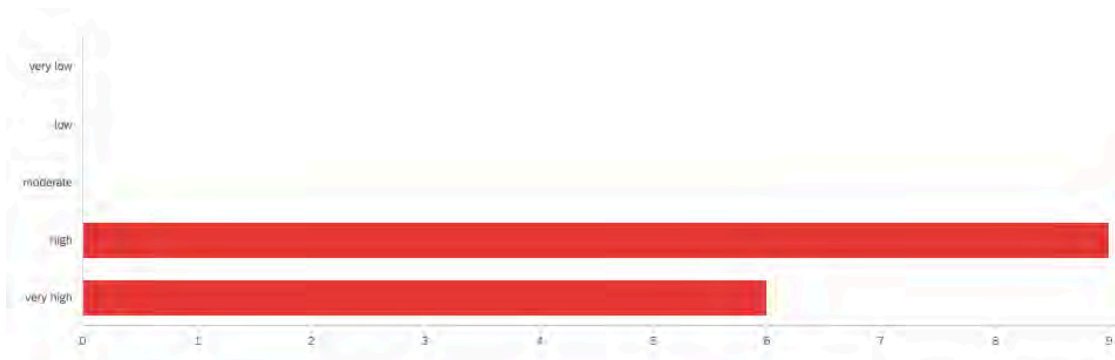- preparing participants for launching their own exchanges (mean value 4.27 out of 5, increase by 0.42)
- helping participants to develop VE-related pedagogical competences (mean value 4.33, increase by 0.38)
- helping participants develop digital competence (mean value 4.13, increase by 0.23).

#	Question	min	max	Mean for 1st iteration	Mean for 2nd iteration	Difference
1	The course met my expectations	4.00	5.00	4.00	**4.60**	**+0.60**
2	The course helped me to understand what Virtual exchange is	3.00	5.00	4.40	**4.60**	**+0.20**
3	The training helped me to develop pedagogical knowledge necessary for VE	3.00	5.00	3.95	**4.33**	**+0.38**
4	The training offered helped me to improve my digital competence necessary for VE	3.00	5.00	3.90	**4.13**	**+0.23**
5	The training helped me to learn tools necessary for VE	3.00	5.00	4.15	**4.13**	**- 0.02**
6	The training helped me to improve my ability to communicate and collaborate online	3.00	5.00	4. 30	**4.20**	**- 0.10**
7	I feel I'm prepared to launch my own exchange	2.00	5.00	3.85	**4.27**	**+0.42**

Table 1 Distribution of responses to Question 10: To what extent will you agree with the following statements?

Question 13 investigated perceived contribution of particular course components to participants' learning. A closer look at responses (Table 2) reveals significant increase for iteration 2 in the areas of **overall content and activities** (mean 4.33 increase by 0.38), **forum discussions** (4.33, increase by 0.86) and the value of **contributions from other participants** (4.07, increase by 0.39). The value of teachers' moderation remained on the same high level (mean value 4.13).

#	Field	Min	Max	Mean for 1st iteration	Mean for 2nd iteration	Difference
1	**Overall content and activities**	3.00	5.00	3.95	4.33	**+0.38**
2	**forum discussions**	4.00	5.00	3.47	4.33	**+0.86**
3	**video sessions**	1.00	5.00	3.89	3.60	-0.29
4	**trainers' moderation**	3.00	5.00	4.05	4.13	**+0.08**
5	**other participants' contributions**	3.00	5.00	3.68	4.07	**+0.39**

Table 2 Distribution of responses to Question 13: How would you rate the contribution to your learning from the following parts of the content of the course?

The respondents have also provided the following feedback on the overall value of the training:

- *This training works well for me in terms of gaining first hand experiences from practitioners and educators, and got to know them personally to some extent. I sincerely hope the course can be further developed for best learning results and professional guidance.*

- *I think you did a great job. The course is light in its format while rich in its content and offers the possibility to engage with colleagues on relevant subjects.*

- *Even though I regret that I could not participate actively to the end of the training, I got a good insight into the design and content of the training and this was one of my main aims. I think that you - the EVOLVE team did a great job and offered a multifaceted and well balanced training.*

COURSE MODERATION

As in the previous iteration, it was extremely rewarding to see participants' appreciation of trainers' moderation:

- *I appreciated the opportunity of meeting specialists in VE who work on various aspects of VE. I was able to see the multiple perspectives of VE.*
- *The people involved were very polite and ready to answer all of my questions.*
- *I am grateful for all trainers from the course who has been with us every step of the way, leading and guiding us even after the course.*

While the course materials have been published as open educational resources, an accompanying handbook has been created to highlight the importance of moderation and suggest useful strategies and techniques to be followed by prospective trainers.

COURSE INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION

Another highly evaluated aspect of the training was the quality of interaction and communication, either synchronous and asynchronous which, as previously,in some cases led to establishing new partnerships.

- *Interacting with the other participants, reading about their experiences and expertise. The week on the pedagogy of VE was really helpful for me. I keep going back to my notes from that week.*
- *I appreciated the opportunity of meeting specialists in VE who work on various aspects of VE. I was able to see the multiple perspectives of VE.* •
- *interacting with people working in the same sector, passionate about VE.*
- *I liked the resources, the forums and the synchronous sessions.*

The comments show that one of the unquestionable values of the training is its interactive character grounded in the community-of-practice approach. Indeed, a sense of community has been nurtured consistently in both iterations through various Co-Laboratory tasks and activities and the choice of supporting technology. The community building character of synchronous meetings (ZOOM) was specifically highlighted.

- *I thought the video sessions brought things together in a lively way. The atmosphere was constructive. Maybe break out rooms with clearly identified questions could be used more often. On the whole it was a very rewarding experience with highly qualified colleagues. I loved it!*

Following the evaluation of the first iteration, the EVOLVE team had been already aware of the importance of synchronous sessions in the training. Although the participants reported problems attending all the sessions and only some managed to do so, they were almost unanimous in appreciating their value for stimulating social bonding and for the exchange of views and experiences.

Fig. 7 Distribution of responses to Question 18: How many drop-in sessions have you attended?

As in the previous training, the participants highlighted a motivating value of such sessions, the friendly feel of groupness and social bonding that video meetings stimulated. As participants said, they also had helped them understand other perspectives and points of view and realise the importance of these elements in a virtual exchange project.

- *(I liked) being together and helping one another).*
- *Interacting with the other participants, reading about their experiences and expertise.*
- *I attended all sessions and they were indeed precious experiences.*
- *It was a wonderful experience video sessions are definitely the highlight of the course as they provide the participants with "groupness" feeling (sense of belonging, creating a group exchanging ideas here and now,*
- *to meet with international educators from EU institutions and discussed VE and intercultural communication.*
- *I was mostly happy and relieved(?) to meet other teachers who do not hesitate to take risks with pedagogical development. I was very inspired by them. I saw that VE is used in a variety of contexts and that opened my mind.*
- *One of the synchronous sessions I attended was not so typical, because we were a very small group. But I feel I benefited a lot from this session, because we had room to discuss the potentials of Mahara for self-reflection processes.*
- *openness to discussion, nice atmosphere that puts everyone at ease.*
- *lovely to put faces & voices to names; feel the enthusiasm. Challenge for me to not be able to join in more was the sometimes late notice (or my awareness on the notice!) and it coinciding with a session I had to facilitate myself.*

All these comments, again, confirm that the participants see the value of nurturing the social aspect in VE and that they are likely to promote meaningful social interactions in their own exchanges.

When asked to suggest improvement for synchronous session, the respondents proposed the following:

- *I'd like to suggest to include more synchronous sessions in the course to allow for maximum participation, interaction and communication.*

- *There could be more discussions in break out rooms to increase the level of intimacy between the participants.*

- *Synchronous sessions are a good way to meet and discuss. However, it should be a bit more guided with clearer topics for discussion and step by step. Sometimes it is difficult to take the floor when many other colleagues would like to talk at the same time. Perhaps limiting the number of users per session to 4-5 would be a good idea.*

The above suggestions have been included in the course handbook for prospective Co-Laboratory trainers, which is available at https://evolve-erasmus.eu/download/co-laboratory-guidebook/

COURSE CONTENT

As one of the objectives of the evaluation was to confirm the relevance of the implemented modifications, the participants were asked to rate the learning value of particular modules on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1- of very little value, to 5 - of high value.

Table 3 below compares the mean values obtained in both training iterations for particular modules. Higher values in iteration 2 confirm the efficacy of the modified, more compact version of the training. While all the modules were evaluated highly, in practically all of them respondents reported a higher level of satisfaction than in iteration 1.

#	Module	Min	Max	Mean for iteration 1	Mean for iteration 2	difference
2	The Pedagogy of VE	3.00	5.00	4.00	4.47	**+0.47**
3	Facilitated Dialogue	3.00	5.00	4.16	4.20	**+0.04**
4	Task design and technology	2.00	5.00	3.84	4.40	**+0.56**
7	Intercultural Competence and VE	2.00	5.00	3.61	4.13	**+0.52**
8	Critical Digital Literacy and VE	1.00	5.00	3.41	3.93	**+0.52**

Table 3: Distribution of responses to Question 16: How do you rate the contribution to your learning from the following training modules?

When it comes to the perceived relevance of particular course sections, participants assessed particularly highly the modules covering the issues of VE pedagogy (mean value 4 of 5) and task design and technology (4.40), which was also reflected in open-ended comments:

- *The week on the pedagogy of VE was really helpful for me. I keep going back to my notes from that week.*
- *The training really helped me to take the plunge. The week on VE pedagogy and task sequences really informed the design of this VE.*

CHALLENGES

Just as in iteration 1, the challenges reported by the participants resided outside of the training itself and resulted from participants' busy schedules and lack of time. As said in participants' own words:

- *I was unable to participate in the F(acilitated) D(ialogue) session, as like last year it unfortunately fell during a holiday.*
- *The only problems might have resulted from huge workload at work.*
- *The most important reason is being busy with other activities. In general, I attended this course because I was interested in VE but the timing was not ideal.*
- *I have attended the ones I could as really appreciate them. Ones I didn't attend were due to clashes with my own facilitation.*
- *Trying to keep to the timetable. I have a full teaching post, so it's difficult to find the time.*
- *Time management...and I have a lighter load this year. So I would welcome a session like this again in June.*
- *Managing work with the training.*
- *The training was taking place at the same time as the E+VE Advanced training, which I also attended. Both together was very hard to align with my work and this was ultimately the reason why I dropped out.*
- *I work as freelancer so couldn't always relate/ implement ideas when it refers to "your institution*

COURSE IMPROVEMENTS - PARTCIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS

As in the previous survey, the respondents were asked to point out the areas in need for potential improvements.

In general, the largest number of comments (although not many) suggested organizational improvements such as 1) *providing more options for video meetings*, 2) *scheduling the training in a less busy time* or 3) *providing steps, templates and technology scaffolding* for genuinely beginning teachers.

- *For participants who are not so experienced in using digital tools, it would be very helpful to add the option which would include a concise classification of tools which can be used in VE and some tasks to practise the use of these tools.*
- *Maybe include some sort of template/canvas or "fil conducteur" to guide people through adapting a course to VE, from prep to debrief, and connecting it timely, in relevant ways to the VE content elements.*
- I *believe everything was well planned but I would organize the training during a non-teaching period in Europe (e.g. summer).*

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Course improvements and structure modifications implemented by the EVOLVE Team in response to the feedback received after Co-Laboratory 1, made it possible to deliver VE training of even higher quality, and even better tailored to HE educators' needs.

First of all, the training succeeded in its stated objectives of making the participants aware of VE and knowledgeable of the particular VE competences and equipping them, at least to some extent with the major competences required for informed implementation of VE. It has also succeeded in making them experience the feeling of being involved in online intercultural collaboration and communication, which are the very essence of VE. While some participants were fairly experienced in Virtual Exchange, they commented on the value of the training as a model for the training sessions delivered to their colleagues.

As regards other strengths of the training recognised by training participants, they include the modelling function of tasks and tools, which helped the participants develop their own competences. Other strengths repeatedly mentioned in participants' comments were the nurturing of a community feel and highlighting the social aspect of the VE experience, both from the teacher and the learner perspectives.

As Co-Laboratory resources have been published on open licenses to be reused and repurposed at HE institutions, the conclusions drawn from both training evaluations have been included in Co-Laboratory training guidebook. The guidebook is available at https://evolve-erasmus.eu/download/co-laboratory-guidebook/ and its purpose is to assist future instructors in making the most of the training content. It provides comments on the practicalities of the various aspects of the training including the content of the modules, tasks and types of interaction and suggested technologies.

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