

Facilitating global virtual exchange: Insights from a feminist perspective

Abstract

This study examines, through the lens of feminist pedagogy, the reflections of six educators on their teaching practices during and after an international virtual exchange (VE) project. The project involved facilitators in Belgium, Brazil, Japan, and Portugal. Thematic analysis of a focus group discussion and nine months of email exchange revealed two key themes: 'Navigating Contradictory Currents', which focused on empowerment, control, and identity, and 'Harboring Unity,' which explored female bonding and the building of a virtual community. The findings highlight the balance between control and autonomy, the importance of inclusive approaches, leadership and community building. The study underscores the challenges and benefits of (VE) in promoting access and equity, in line with SDG4. By integrating Wenger's community of practice framework, the project facilitated professional support networks and collaboration. These insights demonstrate the potential of feminist pedagogical practices to enhance virtual learning environments, fostering critical engagement, self-reflection, and mutual support for transformative educational experiences.

Keywords

Virtual exchange, feminist pedagogy, Communities of Practice, reflective practice, digital pedagogy, intercultural communication

Introduction

The integration of digital technologies into education has been accelerating at an unprecedented rate, reshaping the landscape of teaching and learning globally. This transformation aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations (2015). Among many digital technology educational endeavors, virtual exchange (VE) programs have emerged as powerful tools for facilitating cross-cultural interaction, fostering global competencies, and expanding access to educational opportunities irrespective of geographic and socioeconomic barriers (Fonseca et al., 2021; O'Dowd, 2021; Sokol and Zhang, 2023). In this context, feminist pedagogy offers a valuable framework for examining and enhancing these virtual interactions by emphasizing empowerment, community, and reflective practice.

Research in feminist pedagogy traditionally emphasizes fostering inclusive, empowering, and collaborative learning environments that challenge traditional power dynamics and promote student agency (Shrewsbury, 1987). These principles advocate for creating safe spaces where diverse voices are valued (McCusker, 2017). Most existing literature, however, predominantly explores their application in face-to-face educational settings, and the adaptation and impact of feminist pedagogical principles within virtual environments have been underexplored. Herman and Kirkup (2017) discuss the challenges of integrating feminist pedagogical principles in distance learning, highlighting the need to address power dynamics even in online settings. They argue that technology-mediated education often reproduces existing inequalities and that more research is needed to adapt feminist approaches to these contexts. Moreover, a review by Koseoglu et al. (2020) points out the limited research on feminist pedagogy in distance education and emphasizes the need for studies that critically examine how feminist principles can be effectively incorporated into online learning environments. The "Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Online" guide developed

by Daniel and Howard (2020) at Tulane University was created to help educators implement feminist teaching practices in online and hybrid courses, reflecting a growing interest in this area but also acknowledging that the field is still developing.

This study addresses how feminist pedagogy unfolds in the nuanced context of VE, drawing on its roots in critical and transformative education to prioritize inclusive, participatory learning spaces that foster agency, collaborative knowledge construction, and equitable educational outcomes across diverse cultural perspectives.

This research paper explores the experiences and reflections of educators engaged in a (VE) program, analyzed through the lens of feminist pedagogy. The central research question guiding this study is: "How could the reflections of educators on their teaching practices during and after the virtual exchange be interpreted through the lens of feminist pedagogy?" Therefore, this study aims to explore the intricate ways in which feminist pedagogical principles manifest in virtual learning environments and influence teaching practices.

In this qualitative study, six educators from diverse cultural backgrounds collaborated online to promote a VE program to students from four different countries. Through thematic analysis of focus group discussion and email exchanges over nine months, this research explored how feminist pedagogical principles influenced their experiences and outcomes, highlighting challenges and strengths to contribute to international education practices.

Feminist pedagogy

Feminist pedagogy is a transformative approach to teaching and learning that aims to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment by addressing power dynamics and fostering collaborative learning. According to Shrewsbury (1987: 7), feminist pedagogy is rooted in three main concepts: community, empowerment and leadership and "strives to help students and teachers learn to think in new ways, especially ways that enhance the integrity and wholeness of the person and the person's connections with others". This pedagogical approach also prioritizes collaborative learning, as emphasized by hooks (1994), who argues that education should be a "practice of freedom" where students and teachers engage in a mutual exchange of knowledge. By privileging voice, respecting personal experiences, and challenging traditional norms, feminist pedagogy creates inclusive learning environments that prioritize diversity, equity, and empowerment (Shrewsbury, 1987; Webb et al, 2002; McCusker, 2017).

In higher education, feminist pedagogy has been shown to foster a more inclusive and engaging learning environment (Light et al, 2015). Maher and Tetreault (2001) highlight that feminist pedagogical practices, such as promoting open dialogue and encouraging multiple perspectives, can enhance students' critical thinking skills and their ability to engage with complex social issues. Furthermore, Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona (2009) suggest that feminist pedagogy can lead to increased student participation and a greater sense of community within the classroom. Research has shown that feminist pedagogical practices can significantly enhance the effectiveness of virtual learning environments. For instance, Anderson and Kanuka (2003) found that online learning communities that incorporated feminist pedagogical principles reported higher levels of student engagement and satisfaction.

Recent reviews of feminist trends in distance and hybrid higher education underscore the growing significance of these approaches in online and blended learning contexts. Koseoglu (2020) notes that while there is limited scientific literature addressing the intersection of distance education and feminist pedagogy, it is crucial to develop more studies from a critical perspective to deepen the theoretical and practical interactions between these fields (Koseoglu et al., 2020; Migueliz et al., 2020). These interactions have often been described as "conflictive relationships" (Aneja, 2017), highlighting the need for new theoretical approaches to address

the unique challenges of modern technology-mediated learning environments (Herman & Kirkup, 2017).

Virtual Exchange in Higher Education

One such approach that could benefit from the insights of feminist pedagogy is VE. Feminist pedagogy, with its focus on democratizing education, learner-centric approaches, and critical engagement, complements the principles of VE.

VE contributes to the development of digital-pedagogical, intercultural, and foreign language competencies in student teachers, providing a structured environment for online collaboration (Baroni et al., 2019). It helps students overcome stereotypes and gain confidence as communicators in a second language, fostering a practical understanding of language as a communication tool (O'Dowd, 2021). Additionally, teachers participating in VE projects benefit from methodological innovation and new professional partnerships, as evidenced by research on teacher engagement in VE (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2021).

VE also increases student interest in learning about different cultures, emphasizing the importance of cultural learning in foreign language education (Schenker, 2013). The Consortium of Virtual Exchange underscores the importance of VE in developing 21st-century skills, digital competencies, teamwork, collaborative problem-solving, and critical thinking, contributing to digital equity in international education (Fonseca et al., 2021). Overall, VE provides a platform for enhancing critical skills, promoting cultural understanding, and preparing students for global interactions (Sokol & Zhang, 2023), in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4, target number 7: education for sustainable development and global citizenship.

This approach is increasingly adopted in higher education to support various educational goals, including language acquisition, intercultural competence, and global citizenship education (O'Dowd, 2019). Through VE, students and educators engage in meaningful intercultural exchanges, fostering a deeper understanding of global perspectives and enhancing educational outcomes.

For educators, VE offers numerous benefits. It allows teachers to create engaging and interactive learning environments, supports continued professional development, and fosters a sense of global community among students. VE opens opportunities for teachers to develop new professional partnerships, engage in collaborative academic initiatives, and enhance their online collaboration skills. Furthermore, it encourages innovative teaching approaches, leading to improved educational outcomes and providing students with valuable skills for the globalized world (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2021).

In the context of foreign language teaching, VE promotes cultural learning, improves language skills, enhances learning motivation, and helps establish a language learning community. Research has shown that VE can contribute to teachers' professional development by offering opportunities for collaborative learning and the exchange of teaching practices. For instance, VE projects have helped teachers develop digital-pedagogical, intercultural, and foreign language competencies, enhancing the quality of the language education they provide (Baroni et al., 2019). Teachers can design VE activities that encourage students to engage with peers from different cultural backgrounds, fostering a deeper understanding of the target language and culture. This approach not only improves language proficiency but also prepares students to communicate effectively in a globalized world (Luo & Yang, 2021).

From Virtual Exchange to Feminist Pedagogy and Community of Practice

Both feminist pedagogy and VE prioritize inclusivity, equity, and the development of critical consciousness. Feminist pedagogy encourages collaborative learning environments

where all voices are valued, paralleling VE's focus on intercultural dialogue and mutual respect (Aneja, 2017).

For educators, feminist pedagogy offers strategies for creating equitable and participatory VE environments. By integrating feminist pedagogical practices, teachers can design VE activities that encourage critical thinking, self-reflection, and mutual support. Complementing these approaches, Wenger's community of practice (CoP) framework provides a valuable lens for understanding how educators can effectively implement VE. CoPs are groups of individuals who share a passion for a particular practice and engage in collective learning through collaboration and interaction (Wenger, 1998). In the context of VE, CoPs help educators develop and sustain effective virtual learning environments by fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

Research has shown that VE can contribute to the professional development of educators by providing opportunities for collaborative learning and knowledge sharing. For instance, a study on a European policy experiment involving telecollaborative teacher education found that VE projects helped teachers develop digital-pedagogical, intercultural, and foreign language competencies. These projects facilitated innovation and international collaboration, enhancing the overall quality of teacher education (Baroni et al., 2019). VE supports the development of CoPs among educators by providing a platform for ongoing professional development and mutual support. Educators can use VE to create networks of practice, where they share resources, discuss challenges, and collaboratively develop new teaching strategies (Cuddapah and Clayton, 2011). This collaborative approach enhances individual teaching practices and contributes to the overall improvement of educational programs.

Incorporating feminist pedagogy and Wenger's CoP framework into VE in higher education foreign language teaching enriches the educational experience for educators by fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and critically engaged learning environment. This combination promotes community-building, inclusive spaces, and power-sharing among students and teachers, ultimately shaping curricula to challenge oppressive norms and empower all learners to succeed and lead (Ludlow, 2004; Valle-Ruiz et al, 2015).

Methodology

This qualitative study of six educators from diverse cultural backgrounds engaging in a collaborative online environment to promote a VE program to students from four different countries used thematic analysis of a focus group discussion and multiple email exchanges among the educators over a nine-month period, uncovering ways in which, feminist pedagogical principles influenced their experiences and the outcomes of the VE. It also identified program development challenges and strengths for the benefit of international education practices knowledge and discussions.

Research setting: The SENSE virtual exchange project

The data generated in this study was based on a pilot version of a VE project that took place from October to December 2023. This project is called SENSE (Sensory Experiences for Navigating Cultural Sensitivity in English). It involved a total of 120 students from higher education institutions from Portugal (18), Belgium (61), Japan (32), and Brazil (9). The SENSE project was implemented in undergraduate English courses: Tourism in Portugal, Architecture in Belgium and Japan, and Computer Science in Japan. Graduate students from Health Sciences courses in Brazil who wanted to improve their English skills while having an international experience, served as volunteers in the project.

This project aimed to foster appreciation and understanding of different cultures, contributing to SDG4. Students were encouraged to explore and share cultural knowledge and traditions related to the five senses. To achieve this, the platform Rise Articulate was utilized to craft and structure interactive content that was instrumental in advancing the VE, thereby enriching intercultural communication and collaborative learning throughout the eight phases of the project. There were several tasks distributed amongst these eight phases (cf. table 1).

Table 1: Overview of SENSE phases and tasks

Phase	Task(s)	Technological Tools
1: Ice-breaking	“Getting to know you” activity: Elephant, apple, cup or something completely different? – Students write a short introduction about themselves and post a drawing they made according to instructions. All students comment on the posted drawings.	Padlet
2: Awareness	Watching a Ted Talk video: The danger of a single story – focusing on cultural awareness and intercultural competences.	Online resources and materials
3: Exploration	Going on an exploratory walk: Students are divided into groups based on the five senses and take an exploratory walk in their respective cities observing and experiencing their surroundings through their assigned sense	
4: Thinking	Reflecting on the assigned sense and researching information about their culture and traditions according to that sense, students research what they will need to create a multimedia postcard to share with students from the other countries.	Online resources and materials
5: Multimedia Postcard	1. Students have created a multimedia postcard that showcases an interesting fact, tradition, or cultural practice from their country, related to the assigned sense. 2. Viewing all the different teams' postcards on a virtual wall, students leave individual comments and reflections. 3. Groups meet with other partner university groups and generate cultural questions.	PowerPoint Genially Canva Padlet Zoom Google Teams WhatsApp

6: Compilation	On the basis of the inter-team discussions, each group of students compiles a list of 10 questions.	Word
7: Quiz Time	Hosting a synchronous quiz online, students use previously generated questions to test other students' sensory knowledge of the various countries.	Zoom
8: Reflection	In the final meeting, students share thoughts on what they learned about the cultures and disciplines involved, highlighting any interesting trivia facts or insights gained from the experience.	Google Forms survey

Participants and data collection

The focus of this study is on the facilitators of the SENSE Project. The participants were six female educators from four higher education institutions located in Belgium, Brazil, Japan and Portugal. Their teaching experience ranged from 15 to 32 years. The educators were all women, identifying as white, cisgender females, and all have children. Their experience with a VE program varied from this being their first time developing one, to having up to 10 years of involvement with VE. All participants have been involved with internationalization activities, either personally and/or professionally. The Brazilian facilitator is a health sciences teacher, while the others are foreign language teachers.

To gain insights into these educators' teaching practices during and after the VE exchange, data was collected through email exchanges among the six coordinators from June 2023 to January 2024. Additionally, a focus group was conducted to gain detailed reflections from the educators about the whole process of developing a VE program. According to Krueger and Casey (2015), focus groups are effective for understanding the reasons behind participants' behaviors and attitudes by fostering discussion and interaction within the group. This method is particularly valuable for feminist research as it supports naturalistic inquiry, acknowledges social context, and shifts the power dynamics in research (Wilkinson, 1998). These characteristics make focus groups well-suited to feminist methodologies that prioritise participant voices and social context.

The focus group for this study was organized and facilitated by an external expert with extensive research experience in gender bias in scientific fields and feminist pedagogy. The moderator's role was to enable the participating educators to share their impressions and experiences regarding the implementation of the VE Program.

The moderator used open-ended questions to guide the conversation. These included:

- "Can you name some challenges and benefits of the collaboration process?"
- "What hopes or fears did you have about this project?"
- "What have you learned in terms of virtual pedagogy and your practice as a professor?"

All six educators took part in the focus group online session, which lasted two hours. It was recorded in its entirety and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the two-hour focus group transcript and email exchanges, allowing for the identification and interpretation of recurring themes related to VE, feminist pedagogy and CoP. This method provided a systematic approach to coding and analyzing qualitative data, facilitating an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the familiarization phase all researchers read the focus group transcript and the email exchanges. Subsequently, initial descriptive codes were generated for important features of the data according to VE, feminist pedagogy and CoP. Themes were created and all the coded data was collected and categorized by theme. These phases were informed by an iterative process that combined a systematic and rigorous analysis of the transcripts with the literature review, namely feminist pedagogy and CoP.

Results

Through systematic categorization and coding, themes and sub-themes were identified to answer the following research question: *How could the reflections of educators on their teaching practices during and after the virtual exchange be interpreted through the lens of feminist pedagogy?*

Two overarching themes were identified echoing Shrewsbury's identification of empowerment, community and leadership, concepts further explored in more recent literature on feminist pedagogy and its implications on teaching and learning practices (Light et al, 2015; Valle-Ruiz et al, 2015). For the purposes of this study, the themes were named as follows:

- Navigating Contradictory Currents: empowerment, control and identity
- Harboring unity: Female bonding and the building of a virtual community

The authors focused on the discussions that were conducted during and after the VE implementation. Although themes overlapped to varying degrees across the data collected, the authors opted for a parallel data set analytical approach and proceeded with a thematic separation of the categories in the focus group discussion transcript and the email exchanges. After sub-themes were identified, they were later compared, contrasted and reorganized to determine the final main themes that bridged both data sets, therefore allowing a more organic and reflexive approach to thematic analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

THEME 1: Navigating Contradictory Currents: Empowerment, Control and Identity

Student empowerment and agency: what it should be. At different intervals of the focus group discussion, all the group members agreed that participating students of the VE should feel empowered, i.e. be “heard”, or have “a voice”, to create a community “of their own”, or “for themselves”, therefore putting the emphasis on students’ active and collective contribution to fostering a sense of belonging and self-expression in the virtual environment. This learning objective is coupled with the teachers’ perceptions of the importance of empowerment as regards students’ future target skills or abilities to “communicate globally”. The educators identified two main strategies to encourage student project ownership and community building through the integration of inclusive approaches and the creation of a “safe space”.

In this respect, two educators referred to VE initiatives as ways of providing access to international collaboration to students who may be otherwise excluded from this type of experience, mainly due to financial constraints or less privileged socio-economic backgrounds:

“There’s a range of students in terms of finance, and so a lot of students don’t get the opportunity of study abroad. [...]. Now (the currency) is super, super weak. And so it’s made even less likely that many of them can go abroad.”

A similar observation could be made in another educational context: “I work at a public university, so we have students from many backgrounds, and many are socio-economically vulnerable students [...]. They would not have the opportunity of an international experience.”

The educators had varying interpretations of what a safe online space means. One of them noted that:

“[T]he main idea of going for the five senses at the beginning [...] was just because we had very different contexts, different disciplines as well. So, we needed to find some sort of a theme that everyone could relate to [...]. [...] choosing the topic [of the five senses] would be safe enough for the students to express themselves. [...]. Because they could really, you know, go in many directions.”

Another educator correlated the idea of a safe space with the avoidance of politically sensitive subjects (“We didn’t put like a politics point of view”). This statement somehow contradicts the intent of feminist pedagogy, which challenges normative views of education and touches upon questions of identity and power (Valle-Ruiz et al, 2015). A third participant observed the interplay between safety, exposure and student agency in choosing the tools at their disposal and suggested [offering] students different alternatives to choose from so that they choose what they feel more like comfortable. This was reiterated later, once the VE ended, when reflecting upon the experience:

“[...] we considered safety when we well, not the topic [...] when we decided on the postcard [...] [the students] can just use the audio. [...]. As it could be flexible and general enough for them if they want to appear in the video. [...] we know well some of them are more confident about exposing themselves.”

· *How much is too little? A control dilemma*

All the above-mentioned instances of teachers’ expectations of how student empowerment should be stimulated in virtual settings were counter-balanced by the educators’ reflections on their own teaching styles and on the delicate balance between providing guidance and maintaining control. The educators expressed concern regarding how much free rein they should give to students in terms of autonomy and mutuality, what Shrewsbury (1987) refers to as “power arrangements”. In that respect, there is a significant shift in perspective towards teacher control and management strategies when data from the email exchanges and the focus group discussion were compared. As mentioned earlier, the email exchanges channeled the preparatory discussions on Zoom into feedback loops on task design, mainly focusing on what the students were expected to produce. The conversations revolved around pedagogical decisions and organizational as well as technical aspects such as deadlines, task delivery, activity order, students’ contributions and the choice of technological tools.

Whilst looking at the process retrospectively, the educators concurred that the exchange should have been less structured and teacher-directed, by giving the students the “chance to do that more on their own” or “letting them loose and seeing [if] they would work as a group”.

Yet, they repeatedly shared conflicting feelings on the extent to which the exchange should be facilitated, and on whether they should refrain from intervening, or in their own words, “drive the boat”. The following excerpts illustrate the need for control of student engagement and the teachers’ apprehension about task completion:

“[...] I was so grasping how these students would feel, you know [...] OK, did you do the task? This week’s task? Have you read things and everything? [...]. I said, OK everyone and there is a new topic. You know, go and check that. Let me know if you have any [questions].”

“Yeah, the deadlines and finding the time to meet and making sure that we knew what to do and what to say and not to say too much in order not to spoil the following activity or to make sure they had all the information to be able to do the task.”

Interestingly, those observations led to self-reflective insights and allowed the educators to take a critical stand towards their own teaching practices, more specifically their perceptions of self-efficacy, and their expectations in terms of VE implementation and outcomes. The following excerpts illustrate how they positioned themselves in terms of leadership responsibilities, but also how they dealt with frustration, uncertainty, unpredictability and challenges in intercultural VE environments:

“Maybe something that we need to work on in the future would be to actually make them have those aha moments at some point [...]”

“[We should have given them] more time to think and interact. [...]. Well, they would have gone deeper in their reflection, because, yes [...] whenever we asked the question, they gave the answer without even thinking as if they were confirming what they already believed and thought. It didn’t go deeper.”

“I was very concerned about how the students are going to meet and actually talk in English so. We had some meetings, then we saw it didn’t work. Then we changed.”

“[...] we had big hopes and expectations. Oh yeah, I want them to learn this and this and this. And then we started to panic when we realized that [...] they were supposed to meet, and they haven’t met yet. They should be talking. They’re not talking or they’re not talking as much as we would like them to.”

“We expect[ed] maybe different things from our students. And I think the main challenge was to accommodate all those differences [...]”

Here again, the teachers touched upon the question of balancing power exertion and student agency to achieve desired learning outcomes while implicitly acknowledging their own disappointment, their desire to outperform and the strategies that they tend to adopt in order to “let go” and adapt to unexpected results. One contributor compared this mix of often irreconcilable emotions, frequently encountered in VE planning, to the “mental load” or the extra pressure that [women] usually put on themselves”. Another one felt that she had “a big responsibility for a lot of people” and “wanted them to do everything perfect”.

Am I a feminist? A question of identity. When navigating through these antagonist feelings and trying to find a compromise between too much control and just enough guidance, two of the teachers metaphorically used the image of a mother to express their thoughts on how they reacted to student responsiveness or lack thereof. One recalled “acting like moms” and “telling [the students] to do this because it’s good for [them] but they didn’t realize that”. Another one jokingly referred to herself as “the irresponsible mother who left them all doing [on] their own.”

Although not directly stated as such, the comments of two other teachers conveyed a similar feeling of responsibility, or at least a supposedly innate motherly attribute such as problem-solving, reminiscent of Butler's (1988) performative acts. One teacher remembered that "whenever there was a problem, [the students] turned to us, and said, *oh, I have a problem, please can you help me?*" while another one tentatively made a connection between feminist pedagogy and women's readiness to fix problems:

"This doesn't have to do with feminist pedagogy. But I think it does to a certain extent, right? Maybe. We have this capacity of doing this as women, right where we always try to find solutions, right. We're always trying to. To make things better, right? That's like a maternal instinct of ours. I don't know. I don't know what to say."

This excerpt also indicates the degree of gender awareness, gender literacy or familiarity with gender-based perspectives at large among the respondents, sometimes with significant differences in understanding the influence that gender can have on their professional and personal lives, and equally importantly, in intentionally integrating a feminist pedagogical approach to their own teaching practices. Two of them considered themselves at the "opposite end of the [gender awareness] spectrum" and deliberately adopted "feminist principles" to make boys in traditionally male-dominated stem disciplines "think about the impact they're having on the girls around them", or favor referencing women from the Global South or non-binary authors over others, "to make them more visible".

Conversely, the other respondents assumed the role of novices and admitted never thinking about "this female perspective" or never intended to "raise the flag", due to a perceived lack of experience and knowledge. In that respect, it is worth noting that the conversation led the whole group to ponder on discursive constructions on gender identity, and question assumptions about sex, gender, and what those concepts (do not) represent or (do not) mean to them:

"Do we talk about female perspective now that we have nonbinary and now, we're at a different level? I thought should we even be talking about the sexes and males/females? Should we even be talking about this? [...]. I started thinking, yeah, well, what is a female perspective today, in the 21st century?"

"[...] what does feminine mean? I mean, it's not, it's not only related to women. I mean, this is also how we see the world. [...] in very binary terms as well."

Through critical and iterative reflection, one respondent came to the realization that a feminist perspective could be further explored in the interpretation of the five senses in future VE to weave a different narrative and approach the topic from a gender lens. She assimilated the concepts being discussed by rephrasing them in her own words, to fit a new purpose and apply them to the concrete case of the virtual project:

"At the beginning, I didn't really understand where the feminist perspective came from. And then I started looking at the modules we had worked on together in a different way. And, for example, the senses. Well, women pay attention to different senses at different moments. [...] while I teach architecture students, so I try to make them aware of their environment [...]. Hearing is super important for women because they pay a lot of attention to what they can hear, for example, or I'm being followed by somebody, or I can hear something suspect over there. [...]. So, the way you experience your surroundings and the senses that you choose to focus on are very...well, there's a female perspective in a male perspective, I guess. So, maybe it's something we can explore for next year."

THEME 2: Harboring unity: Female bonding and the building of a virtual community

Tell me who you are: more than mundane matters. Another theme that emerged from the data sets was one related to female bonding and its different manifestations during and after the VE. Work-related questions often prompted conversations revolving around the ordinary, the quotidian, such as parental obligations and responsibilities. Interestingly, those considerations were directly linked to the broader context of higher education and took on a more political form. For instance, during the focus group discussion, the respondents were given the opportunity to compare their respective work environments and learn more about the others' personal and professional realities as well as the academic cultures of the countries where they were based. Observed differences ranged from attitudes to childcare duties and professional commitment expectations to equal gender representation in academic tenure. One respondent had to take her son to the doctor and felt sorry for not being able to attend a planned meeting, while one group member recalled "having to leave meetings earlier because [she] had to pick [her] son from school", considering it "normal". This is in striking contrast to what another member shared with the group, "That's very different to Japan, where you're never allowed to leave a meeting [...] early. Because it makes you look weak. As a woman, you know, and there's little flexibility [but] it's getting better. It is changing." Later on, the same teacher expressed pleasant surprise and a sense of relief by this implicitly group-accepted rule:

"[...] when in this group, [...] people [were] like 'oh, I've got to pick up my kids, I'm not coming. I've got to do this, because my children [words missing] and I was like, wow, this is really nice because again, it's [...] not my experience, you know.'"

Likewise, perceptions of gender equality in the academic workplace varied greatly from one respondent to another, highlighting significant disparities but also reinforcing the statistically proven data, such as gender gap in educational roles and under- or overrepresentation in some research and study fields; one respondent stated that "90 something percent" of language teachers where she works are female, whereas another one estimated the same percentage of male professors in STEM disciplines at her own institution. In contrast, a third group member emphasized that "most of English language teachers are foreign men [...] and there's hardly any tenured professors that are women." As a British woman working as a tenured professor at a Japanese university, she identified herself as being "in a sort of minority position".

All these excerpts illustrate how educators' shared professional and personal experiences can significantly enhance mutual understanding of each other's complex realities. This, in turn, fosters intercultural communication skills, which are highly valued in virtual learning and teaching environments. By engaging in meaningful conversations throughout the virtual exchange, the respondents not only formed opinions and listened to multiple viewpoints, but also recognized the "interconnectedness" of seemingly separate parts that held the team together – hence privileging the individual voice (Webb et al, 2002) and at the same time decentering themselves. The following quote encapsulates the idea of respecting personal experiences in all their diversity, showing concern for the others while displaying signs of intimacy and solidarity:

"[Academia] it's a male dominated world. And I think [...] that's why, I don't know, it works as well, as a team, [...] because we're trying to care. We care about the others as well. You know, we care about the way we interact with each other because we really wanted to, we wanted to make it work."

Give and take: same-gendered teamwork. Intrinsic motivation was identified as the common denominator among the different group members and manifested itself in many ways. The

virtual collaboration was described as an opportunity for the teachers to embark on “an exciting adventure” by working with fellow professionals from other countries; “expand[ing] their professional network[s]” and seizing the chance to do something different. It allowed them to “compare [...] experiences of teaching”, notice ways to improve their own practices, and innovate. Additionally, it provided students with a unique chance to participate in an intercultural project, address gaps in their knowledge, and come in contact with global issues and perspectives. This collaboration offered students “non-artificial situations” where English served as the main lingua franca. Although most of the teachers recognized that they were experiencing frustration due to the lack of institutional recognition of the workload involved in this project or the extra hours of unpaid work it entailed, they did identify benefits such as “self-development” and professional growth. The benefits of participating in the VE outweighed the constraints: the teachers were *intrinsically* driven by the opportunities that the collaboration could bring forth and highlighted the satisfaction that they could derive from the whole experience, the outcomes being of secondary importance.

Another recurring sub-theme that cemented the ties of collaboration was teamwork. Teamwork was perceived as a key component of group coherence, the glue that helped build and maintain a solid partnership among persons who were recently strangers. It also materialized in the form of collective leadership that expressed itself most strikingly during the different stages of the VE implementation. The main characteristics of leadership in feminist pedagogy, as described by Shrewsbury, were repeatedly solicited through the exchanges. The teachers suggested ideas, negotiated them while accepting others, and found compromises to achieve a common purpose.

The language adopted was mostly used tentatively, opening ongoing dialogue and feedback loops, and implying that the group members favored consensus and collective approval over any imposed viewpoints that the rest of the team were not convinced of. The adverb “just” conveys a certain degree of flexibility when it comes to proposing new directions: one teacher put a proposal forward as “just an idea” twice, and another one shared “just a few thoughts/questions that [...] [thrown] at [the rest of the group] in preparation for [the] next meeting.” Upon reflection, a third teacher felt she was “coming on a bit too aggressive. [...] [and] would back up a little bit”. Other discursive features were evident, such as the use of modal verbs which in discourse analysis suggest the stance of the speaker or writer towards the proposition being expressed. Because they are particularly suggestive of likelihood, necessity, ability, permission, or obligation of the action described, they often convey the degree of certainty, authority, politeness, or social norms and expectations. Another discursive feature was the suggestion of alternative options available to the group. These features demonstrate a similar type of cautiousness and awareness of prioritizing the group’s interests over individual objectives. The following excerpts encapsulate the teachers’ willingness to “find connections between their needs and the needs of others”:

“Sorry for the delay in replying, first of all we want to thank [teachers’ names] for all their time and work they put into the shared document. We find the information interesting, *however*, the guiding theme is a topic that is covered in another English course [...]. We are attaching our proposals to this email so that *everyone can take a look at them* before the meeting. *We hope you don’t mind*, but we thought it *could* save us time and we *could* discuss *what suits everyone best* [...].”

“Even though sustainability is the buzzword of the moment, I don’t think we talk about it in our SENSE project. [...]. Our major themes are intercultural skills and [the] senses, so I came up with *an alternative for you to think about* [...].”

“I *would like* to discuss more about it, my suggestions *would* be to estimate the amount of hours [...]. And I think we *should* minimize local group meetings [...]. But we can talk it over *perhaps* another time this week...?”

“I welcome your thoughts and feedback on these suggestions. Let’s ensure our project aligns with its core objectives.”

This leads to another feature of leadership worth mentioning, namely, praise or more specifically acts of praising. In some instances, when consensus needed to be reached, teachers adopted a flexible approach to change and demonstrated readiness to adapt, by often placing higher value on collective decisions or on the incorporation of everyone’s ideas in the final result:

“I see we reached an “in-between” content of the module mixing up what we discussed with [teacher's name]s’ suggestions. It turned out great!”

“I think we can try to integrate the different aspects/directions suggested, to have the best of both/all worlds [...].”

Complimenting the others’ work and acknowledging their efforts (“you did a great job, I love it!”) alternated with self-congratulatory messages (“Congrats to us all”), therefore empowering the team members to build a community or “a small culture”, their “own little group”, in which each person could keep a certain degree of autonomy while gaining agency through mutual understanding and co-constructed knowledge.

Discussion

The analysis of educators' reflections on their teaching practices during and after the SENSE project, through the lens of feminist pedagogy, reveals several key insights. Firstly, educators emphasized the importance of empowering students by giving them a voice and enabling the creation of their own community. This focus on empowerment and collaborative learning aligns with the core principles of feminist pedagogy. Strategies such as inclusive approaches were identified as essential for encouraging student ownership and community building. Yet, educator ambitions were thwarted as they also experienced conflict between providing guidance and maintaining control, reflecting the challenges of navigating power dynamics. In other words, facilitators struggled with the degree of autonomy to give students versus how much to structure and direct their learning experiences. Research on critical pedagogies, including feminist pedagogy, has pointed out the “illusion of equality” (Ellsworth, 1989; Valle-Ruiz et al, 2015) and has criticized the myth of open dialogue if institutional power structures (typically the traditional authoritative-subversive relationships between teachers and students) are not questioned. Somehow, the tension felt by the educators in this study reflected this challenge and was a catalyst for reflective practice, where teachers critically examined their teaching styles and the extent to which they exerted control versus fostering student agency.

The concept of safe spaces and inclusive learning environments also emerged as significant. The educators had varying interpretations of what constitutes a safe online space. Some focused on neutral topics to avoid controversy, while others saw the need to open pathways for discussion. According to Ludlow, a supposedly safe space is by nature “contested”, i.e. a room for dialogue around sensitive issues related to privilege and power ultimately leads to discomfort, disagreement and tension (Ludlow, 2004). Given that students are nowadays constantly exposed to polarized opinions on social media platforms, which tend to exacerbate (gender) stereotypes or reinforce the echo-chamber effect, feminist pedagogically designed courses could provide new forms of connectivity through community. By modelling VE environments where students can exchange views informally and reflect on their own

cognitive biases, facilitators can guide students through the process and help them gain multiple nuanced perceptions of others and themselves. These insights, described by one educator as “aha moments”, enrich the learning experience.

Although the facilitators exhibited diverse understandings and levels of familiarity with gender-based perspectives and feminist pedagogy - from deliberate adoption of feminist principles to a lack of prior consideration of these perspectives - female bonding emerged as the backbone of teamwork, one in which personal and professional experiences were shared, and where a female network of collective action dominated. To some extent, it mirrors what Shrewsbury called “re-imagining the classroom as a community”. In traditional educational settings, there is often little consideration of individual needs as means to leverage group empowerment. In the context under scrutiny, the strategies that the educators adopted to foster coherence among themselves and to co-construct a VE initiative included subtle navigation between making oneself heard and finding the best solution, one that would not have been possible without the group’s input and diverse perspectives.

Holliday's (1999) concept of “small cultures” further enriches this discussion by emphasizing the dynamic and contextual nature of cultural interactions within the VE. According to Holliday, culture should be understood in terms of smaller, more fluid social groupings rather than broad, homogeneous categories. This perspective aligns with the observed formation of unique cultural dynamics among the facilitators. The interactions within this project created a distinct small culture characterized by its own set of practices, norms, and relationships, evolving as participants engaged with each other across different contexts and backgrounds. Recognizing the small culture formed within the SENSE project highlights the importance of localized, context-specific approaches to understanding and fostering intercultural competence and community building in educational settings.

Finally, the facilitators recognized the additional emotional and cognitive load associated with planning and implementing VEs, particularly in balancing expectations and dealing with uncertainties, on top of their regular teaching load. Reflective insights highlighted the importance of adaptability, self-efficacy, and managing the emotional aspects of teaching in VE. These ideas underscore the complex interplay between empowerment, control, inclusivity, and professional development in VE settings, offering valuable insights for enhancing teaching practices through the lens of feminist pedagogy. Applying feminist pedagogical principles enables facilitators to create more inclusive and supportive virtual learning environments that address the technical and cognitive demands of VEs, while also prioritizing the emotional and relational aspects of teaching and learning. This holistic approach can lead to more effective and satisfying educational experiences for both facilitators and students, ultimately contributing to the advancement of VEs as a meaningful and impactful mode of education.

Limitations

As these findings are based on a specific project, SENSE, the results may not be generalizable to other VE programs or different educational contexts. The study relies on self-reported data from the facilitators, which can be subject to biases, potentially affecting the accuracy and objectivity of the findings. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on female facilitators, which, while providing valuable insights into gender dynamics, may not capture the full spectrum of experiences and perspectives from male or non-binary facilitators. The availability of institutional support and resources can greatly affect the success of VEs, and the study may not fully account for how variations in support levels across different institutions influence the facilitators' experiences or the overall effectiveness of the program.

Conclusion

The findings highlight key themes of empowerment, navigating power dynamics, safe spaces, gender identity, community building, and the challenges and benefits of a VE program, providing valuable insights for future educational practices. The emphasis on student empowerment and agency, inclusive approaches, and the creation of safe spaces align with the core principles of feminist pedagogy. Educators grappled with balancing control and autonomy, engaging in critical self-reflection to examine their teaching practices. The study also underscores the challenges and benefits of VE, particularly in promoting access and equity for students from diverse backgrounds, in line with SDG 4. These findings underscore the potential of feminist pedagogical practices to enhance virtual learning environments, encouraging critical engagement, self-reflection, and mutual support. Future VEs can build on these insights, further integrating feminist perspectives to create inclusive, empowering, and transformative educational experiences.

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