Educating Democratically and Interculturally Competent Citizens: A Virtual Exchange between University Students in Argentina and the USA

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A B S T R A C T

In this paper we present the analysis and interpretation of data collected during an intercultural virtual exchange undertaken in 2020 in which students from Argentina and the USA explored how trauma and suffering associated with COVID-19 can be channeled through collaborative artistic multimodal creations, and how approaching this in a productive way can lead to self-transformation in terms of intercultural and civic growth.

To obtain unbiased data, we did not give the students information on the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC; 2018) which was fundamental to our conceptualization. Here, we apply an ex post facto research method to explore which of the 20 competences for democratic culture included in the RFCDC were mobilized and deployed by our students during this project. We do so by analyzing their multimodal artistic creations, social actions, and their civic statements from the perspective of the RFCDC definitions and descriptors.

Findings indicate that the virtual exchange project contributed to the cultivation of 'democratically and interculturally competent citizens' as conceptualized in the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.

Keywords: intercultural virtual exchange; university students; COVID-19; Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture; RFCDC; democratically and interculturally competent citizen

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Introduction

In this paper, we analyze how a short-term intercultural virtual collaboration can serve as a pedagogical tool for educating democratically and interculturally competent citizens. First, we overview the theoretical underpinnings of our approach and share a summary of the project. Then, we describe our methodology and discuss our findings based on the analysis of data collected from students' multimodal artistic creations, social/civic actions, and civic statements. Finally, we reflect on the lessons learnt from this intercultural virtual collaboration in terms of using the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) in the curriculum.

The project described in this article was undertaken from the end of May to the end of June 2020 and aimed to explore how discomfort, trauma and suffering caused by COVID-19 could be channeled through the arts in an intercultural virtual exchange (Porto, Golubeva & Byram, 2021). In addition to collecting examples of artistic representation of the crisis and people's reaction to it, and to creating joint multimodal artwork, students from Argentina and the USA were encouraged to take social/civic action in their communities, outside the virtual classroom. The main reason for including this stage in the project was to demonstrate to our students how feelings of discomfort, trauma and suffering can be approached in a productive way and how this can lead to self-transformation and become a contribution to societal response to crises (Porto et al., 2021).

Theoretical underpinnings

Intercultural citizenship education

We draw on critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, 2021), which includes "the ability to critique one's own way of thinking and acting and how this is influenced by societal factors" (2021, p. 45), and which is directly associated with political education; it is the basis for the theory of intercultural citizenship education (ICitE) (Byram, 2008). Byram refined the idea of *politische Bildung* (German for 'political education') and *Demokratie Lernen* (German for 'democracy-learning') (Himmelmann, 2001, 2006), and proposed a shift from the concept of 'intercultural speaker' (Byram, 2009) to 'intercultural citizen'. Intercultural citizens engage in linguistic and cultural mediation, i.e. they are able to collaborate "with other people in the world and [mobilize] the competences required for dialogue with people of other linguacultures" (Byram & Golubeva, 2020, p. 77). They plan and carry out social or civic 'activity in the here and now' (in their social milieu). This activity is based on the principles of 'criticality' (critical analysis and evaluation of facts, events, people, views and so on) and 'internationalism' defined as "a sense of identification beyond national identification and a willingness to work together with people of other countries" (Byram et al., 2017, p. 251). The axioms and characteristics of intercultural citizenship theory and pedagogy were laid down by Alred et al. (2006) and we designed our project to meet these requirements (see Porto et al., 2021). Essentially intercultural citizenship education involves:

    ○ causing/facilitating intercultural citizenship experience, and analysis and reflection on it (and on the possibility of further social and/or political activity, where 'political' is taken in a broad sense to mean activity which involves working with others to achieve an agreed end);

    ○ creating learning/change in the individual: cognitive, attitudinal, behavioural change; change in self-perception/spirituality; change in relationships with Others, i.e. people of different social groups; change which is based in the particular but is related to the universal. (Alred et al., 2006, pp. 233-234)

Affective, behavioral, and cognitive change is essential. It can involve either significant or minor (modest) actions and it can also occur at the level of awareness. It is important to mention that ICitE is not neutral in terms of the values and attitudes it fosters. It is humanistic and democratic (Byram, 2021), aimed at raising students' awareness of burning issues in the world, engaging them actively with the world and showing them how they can become agents for a positive change in a participatory democracy, i.e. become intercultural citizens. The goal of intercultural citizenship education is to facilitate the development of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding necessary for one to be able to interact with people from other (lingua)cultures in a multicultural community, both locally and globally, in a democratic and interculturally competent way. Of course, education systems, located in particular societal contexts, identify aspired values and attitudes differently depending on the dominant ideologies and beliefs in those societies.

The main pillars of our approach to ICitE are:

1. *Attention to emotions and the affective domain of intercultural citizenship development*

As mentioned above, democratic and intercultural competences are intertwined with emotions and attitudes, not only with behaviors and cognition (Byram, 2021). In our project we took care of this dimension by fostering students' engagement in healing dialogue on the difficult theme of COVID-19 through self-reflection on their emotions and the creation of artwork involving imagination and artistic (not only linguistic) expression.

2. *Engaging students in cooperative work on real-life problems/issues*

Our students engaged in intercultural cooperation to address current real-life problems, in this case the COVID-19 crisis. We invited them to go outside the classroom and take social/civic action 'in the here and now' (Byram, 2008), i.e. in their immediate social context. In this respect, ICitE echoes Dewey (1916) who advocated for creating 'educative experiences' for students, and Vygotsky (1978) who emphasized the importance of cooperative work on real-life problems.

3. *The development of democratic competences as an integral part of intercultural citizenship education*

ICitE is value-laden. Therefore, it is inevitably political and ideological as it implies (explicitly or implicitly) certain values that define aspired goals and impose boundaries. Specifically, in the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC), it is guided by the principles of democracy, justice and the rule of law, human rights, equality, and respect for human dignity. The development of democratic competences in students should be based on critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, 2021) and criticality (Barnett, 1997), in particular with respect to one's own values and those of others, including the valuing of democracy itself (Byram, 2021). However, democracy is an ideological, highly politicized notion, which has been contested in educational theory (Zembylas, 2020), and is perceived and practiced differently across the world. In some education systems, therefore, there might be resistance to the practice of democracy. In these cases, the focus on critical cultural awareness and criticality that we are suggesting will probably not solve the problem as the societies in question might have reservations against these competences.

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC)

The RFCDC (Council of Europe, 2018) offers specific guidance for developing democratically competent citizens through a list of 20 components (values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding) (Figure 1).
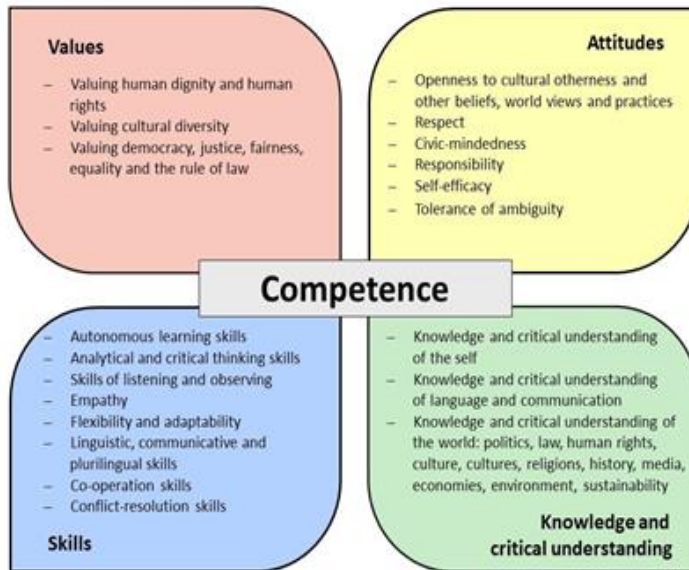

Figure 1. The 20 RFCDC competences required for participating effectively and appropriately in democratic culture within culturally diverse societies. Source: ☐ Council of Europe (2018, Vol. 1, p. 38)

The model was developed based on the review of over 100 models and frameworks of civic, democratic and intercultural competences (see for details Council of Europe, 2016, pp. 28, 56-67), including Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence. The potential controversial dimension is the inclusion of values as competences (Vol. 1, p. 32) and, secondly, on the particular values included which are explicitly those of the Council of Europe (Vol. 1, p. 19). The acceptance of the RFCDC by the member states of the Council of Europe includes therefore acceptance of this value-orientation, and so far, it has been applied mainly in the European context, with some examples from outside Europe (e.g. Golubeva et al., in preparation).

We recognize then that as any other model, the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture is influenced by certain educational discourses, and should be subject to critical evaluation and adaptation to local contexts. Since this project was based in the Americas, we are among the first to do this, and decided to use the RFCDC as it is since we felt no contradiction with the values of our societies, and in fact noticed no resistance to them on the part of our students. Other uses of the RFCDC may reveal other reactions. For instance, its adoption in an Argentinian university as the basis for intercultural language teaching and professional development was questioned using the locus of enunciation argument, i.e. that policy designed in the 'North' is not suitable or appropriate for the 'South' as it perpetuates imperialist, colonialist and Westernized hegemony (Porto & Byram, 2022).

For us, the RFCDC is useful not only because it helps to identify learning objectives in terms of four subsets (values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding), but because it offers a comprehensive list of descriptors that can be used for both designing the curricula and assessing its development. The descriptors were developed and validated to describe three levels of proficiency: basic, intermediate and advanced (see for details Barrett, 2016; and Council of Europe, 2018, Vol. 2). We use these descriptors as reference to evaluate whether our virtual exchange project offers an opportunity to mobilize and deploy participants' intercultural and democratic citizenship competences, following the working definitions developed by the international group of experts:

○ 'democratic competence' is defined as "the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant psychological resources (namely values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding) in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities presented by democratic situations";

○ 'intercultural competence' is defined as "the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant psychological resources in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities presented by intercultural situations. In the case of citizens who live within culturally diverse democratic societies, intercultural competence is construed by the Framework as being an integral component of democratic competence." (Council of Europe, 2018, Vol. 1, p. 32)

It is important to mention that the RFCDC competences are rarely mobilized and deployed *all* at a time. Typically, they are activated in varying clusters depending on "the needs and opportunities of specific democratic and intercultural situations" (Council of Europe, 2018, Vol. 1, p. 35). We take this into account when interpreting our findings.

The project description and context

The four-week long project was launched in May 2020, just a couple of months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the situation has significantly changed. Whereas in May 2020 most of our students reported that they were experiencing emotional discomfort and trauma due to the isolation caused by lockdowns, the sudden switch to remote learning, and the pandemic uncertainty, by now some of them might have suffered personal loss, or have been ill with COVID themselves, and perhaps have been experiencing the long-term effects of COVID-19, including anxiety or depression. Moreover, by now the topic of the pandemic has been dangerously politicized, thus aggravating political polarization in societies. Therefore, the current situation requires careful consideration of the possible risks and ethical concerns arising from bringing into the classroom a difficult theme that may potentially provoke strong emotional outbreaks (see also Porto, Golubeva and Byram, in preparation). With this in mind, we offer a brief overview of the project.

The project was initiated between students from a national public university in Argentina and a minority serving institution in the USA. The two groups – 15 second year students enrolled in an English language course at the University de La Plata and 10 undergraduate students from various disciplines enrolled in Introduction to Intercultural Communication course at University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) – engaged in an intercultural virtual exchange. Both groups had high levels of English proficiency (B2 and higher, according to *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, Council of Europe, 2001) and used it as academic lingua franca. The Argentinian group was more homogeneous in terms of age and their university major than the US-based peers. The students from La Plata were 18-22 years old and all completing either an English teacher or translator program, or both. The age of the students from Maryland ranged from 18 to 26, and they came from different disciplines: Biological Sciences, Business Technology

Administration, Health Administration and Policy, Information Systems, Media and Communication Studies, and Psychology. The US-based group was also more diverse in terms of the first language they spoke and regarding their cultural and religious backgrounds, whereas the Argentinian participants shared the same first language – Spanish.

The students started the project that was designed in six phases by completing a pre-project survey (*baseline stage*), collecting examples of artistic representation of the theme of COVID-19 in their country of origin (for instance, graffiti, drawings, photos, and video clips), and then reflecting on them (*research stage*). They continued by sharing their corpora with their peers in assigned small groups, in which they jointly created an artwork and wrote a group report (*awareness raising stage*). The groups were offered autonomy and could choose themselves what kind of artwork to produce (e.g. posters, drawings, TikTok videos, and so on, see examples in Porto et al., 2021). In the *dialogue stage* the students worked in mixed international groups, where they shared their creations and discussed the associated feelings and emotions. Then, the students jointly created artwork (see examples in Porto et al., 2021). Some groups used English for their art-based creations, others used the whole linguistic repertoire of their group (namely, English, Farsi, Hindi, Italian, and Spanish). During the last week of the project, the students were asked to seek an outlet for their artwork beyond the virtual classroom (e.g. to launch an awareness-raising campaign about the emotional dangers of the pandemic, etc.), and to write a civic statement based on that experience (*action stage*). After completing the project assignments, the participants took a post-project survey (*reflection stage*). Below we provide some concrete examples.

It was an unfunded research project and did not involve a conflict of interest. Students provided their consent and signed release forms. The authors have obtained the right to use students' artistic creations for illustration in their publications.

Research methodology

The research questions [RQs] we posed for this study are:

> Which of the 20 RFCDC competences did participants mobilize and deploy during this project? [RQ1]

> Can short-term intercultural virtual exchanges serve as an effective pedagogical tool for developing students' democratic and intercultural citizenship competences? [RQ2]

To obtain unbiased data, we had not given the students information on the RFCDC; instead, we applied an *ex post facto* research method (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Lincoln, 1990) to explore which of the 20 competences for democratic culture included in the RFCDC were mobilized and deployed by our students during this project. We did so by analyzing students' multimodal artistic creations, social/civic actions, and their civic statements from the perspective of the RFCDC definitions and descriptors. This methodological approach (i.e. to learn "from what has happened") is usual in the field of social and educational research sciences (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 418) to study a context 'retrospectively' as was our aim.

When analyzing students' multimodal artistic creations, social/civic actions and their civic statements, we looked for evidence confirming or disconfirming that the students mobilized and deployed the competences listed in the RFCDC model. And then, we identified at which level (basic, intermediate, or advanced) the students performed. It should be noted that our analysis is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather provides illustrative evidence and supports our view of the feasibility of our pedagogical approach (i.e. intercultural virtual exchange) for developing

certain competences of democratically and interculturally competent citizens, as defined in the RFCDC.

More specifically, to analyze our data, we first identified a relevant descriptor for the competence activated during a certain task/assignment, and then displayed the results of our assessment in a radar chart, in which the inner circle represents the basic level of proficiency, the middle circle represents the intermediate level, and the outer circle represents the advanced level (Barrett et al., 2021). To show how this procedure worked in practice, we illustrate it with an instance of analysis we include in the next section with findings:

> **Box 1.** Extract from the analysis of Example 1:
>
> The students organized their meetings and made decisions regarding collaborative artistic creations on their own, without our (teachers') intervention.

To identify the level of "autonomous learning skills", we went to page 19 of Volume 2 of the RFCDC and checked which of the descriptors (from 58 to 63) better described the students' performance (see Figure 2).

10. Autonomous learning skills

58	Shows ability to identify resources for learning (e.g. people, books, internet)	Basic
59	Seeks clarification of new information from other people when needed	
60	Can learn about new topics with minimal supervision	Intermediate
61	Can assess the quality of his/her own work	
62	Can select the most reliable sources of information or advice from the range available	Advanced
63	Shows ability to monitor, define, prioritise and complete tasks without direct oversight	

Figure 2. Extract from the list of the RFCDC descriptors for autonomous learning skills. Source: Council of Europe (2018, Vol. 2, p. 19)

The three levels are mentioned in the right column. In this particular case, we chose # 63.

We followed this procedure for every instance of activity we considered significant. The authors of this article worked independently in this way to establish inter-rater reliability. In general, choices were quite easy to make; in other cases some difficulty was involved. For example, we considered that the language of descriptors on human rights and human dignity was too specific, not general enough to allow us to identify a suitable level descriptor. This happened for instance with key descriptor #5 "Defends the view that when people are imprisoned, although they are subject to restrictions, this does not mean that they are less deserving of respect and dignity than anyone else". Once the procedure was over, we shared our independent analyses, compared and contrasted them, and resolved incongruences and discrepancies by scrutinizing specific data samples, finding negative evidence for each divergent case at hand, and finally arriving at consensus on each case through discussion. We portrayed the outcome visually using radar charts.

In all cases, our analysis is meant to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. Consequently, we focus on those RFCDC competences that are particularly salient in the examples at hand, always

starting with values and then continuing with attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding.

Findings: Evidence gained from the project products

Multimodal artistic creations

The first set of data was collected during the *dialogue stage,* when the students – after sharing their individual creations on the theme of the pandemic and discussing the associated feelings and emotions – jointly created artwork in mixed international groups. They were offered total freedom and completed this assignment on their own, without the teachers' intervention.

Example 1

> One mixed international group created a TikTok video in which they addressed the theme of togetherness and solidarity. The students presented different perspectives by "putting themselves in the shoes" of a healthcare worker, a patient suffering from COVID-19, an unemployed, a student, and an elderly person. The video had two parts. First, they showed how their characters suffer from the crisis caused by the pandemic by adding captions to their video images: 'I've been working nonstop' (the healthcare worker); 'Will I get better?', 'I hope I don't infect my family as well' (the patient); 'Will I get my job back?' (the unemployed person); 'Am I going to have a graduation?' (the student); and 'I'm afraid to get the disease and die' (the elderly person). In the second part of the TikTok video, the students are sending a positive message 'Without holding hands, we are together'. To reach people worldwide, they apply the whole repertoire of their linguistic skills and translate this phrase in all languages they speak: English, Farsi, Hindi, Italian, and Spanish. They also use non-verbal methods of communication to show that we should not give up and that there are ways how to survive in the crisis and adapt to the new reality, e.g. by touching elbows instead of other greetings. They finish the video with two hashtags: #wearetogether# and #unitywins#, trying to convey that "the only way to come out of this situation is by helping each other" (quoted from the artistic statement accompanying the multimodal creation).

When working on their TikTok video, the students used all languages spoken by the group. Such a stand is likely to be taken due to activation of the *value of cultural diversity* at least at intermediate level, and of the *value of equality* at least at basic level (see respective descriptors in Council of Europe, 2018, Vol. 2: "expresses the view that the cultural diversity within a society should be positively valued and appreciated" (p. 12) and "expresses the view that all [people] should be treated equally […]" (p. 16). Our rationale to say this is that they could have reduced the number of languages they used to English, which was their academic lingua franca, or to English and Spanish. Instead of that, they showed appreciation for cultural diversity and used every single language spoken as first language by group members, namely English, Farsi, Hindi, Italian, and Spanish.

Collaboration in a new (virtual) environment to create multimodal artistic work, in which students presented a variety of perspectives while applying different ways of expression, was possible through the activation of certain attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding of language, communication and the world as listed below with a relevant descriptor added in parentheses (Council of Europe, 2018, Vol. 2):

- Openness (at advanced level: "Seeks contact with other people in order to learn about their culture" and "Seeks and welcomes opportunities for encountering people with different values, customs and behaviours", p. 17). In our example, this is indicated by the students' disposition to collaborate with students from other cultures and to use all their available languages.

- *Respect* (at intermediate level: "Treats all people with respect regardless of their cultural background", p. 17). The fact that the group decided to include the message in all first languages spoken by its members demonstrates their respectful attitude towards their peers' linguistic and cultural diversity. One student, whose first language is Farsi, reflecting upon her experience of working on the multimodal creation, was particularly touched and emotional, saying it was the first time when she was provided an opportunity to use her first language in educational settings in the United States (from forum discussion).

- *Responsibility* (at advanced level: "Consistently meets commitments to others", p. 18). The project timeline was intense (4 weeks) and all students managed to complete their work on time, which demonstrates a strong sense of responsibility.

- *Self-efficacy* (at intermediate level: "Shows confidence about tackling new challenges", p. 32). The video recorded by the students sends a very positive message and shows the students' confidence about tackling problems caused by the pandemic.

- *Tolerance of ambiguity* (at intermediate level: "Deals with uncertainty in a positive and constructive manner", p. 18). The students' positive approach indicates they managed to deal with the uncertainty emerging from the COVID-19 crisis.

- *Autonomous learning skills* (at advanced level: "Shows ability to monitor, define, prioritise and complete tasks without direct oversight", p. 19). The students organized their meetings and made decisions regarding collaborative artistic creations on their own, without our (teachers') intervention.

- *Skills of listening and observing* (at advanced level: "Notices how people with other cultural affiliations react in different ways to the same situation", p. 19). The students said: 'Throughout [working on the video] we noticed that we had a lot in common and we were going through very similar things' (quoted from the group's reflection).

- *Empathy* (at advanced level: "Can describe other people's unique concerns", p. 39). The students were able to put themselves in the shoes of others (healthcare worker, patient, unemployed person, elderly person) and transmit their fears. For example, in the video, taking the role of patient, they say: 'Will I get better?', 'I hope I don't infect my family as well' (the patient). As they explained in their civic statement: 'In times of crisis, everybody should be taken into account, since the pandemic/quarantine has affected us in some way or another. […] [Therefore, we] showed different realities that many people are going through at this difficult time (from a sick person to someone with financial problems).'

- *Flexibility and adaptability* (at intermediate level: "Shows the ability to deal flexibly with and adjust to new people, places and situations", p. 40). The video as final product is evidence of the students' ability to effectively adapt to a new learning environment and work in an unfamiliar group.

- *Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills* (at advanced level, "Is linguistically and culturally competent in at least one language and culture other than his/her own", p. 42). The students mobilized their whole linguistic repertoires when creating the video. English was a foreign language for the Argentinian students and a second language for many US-based students. They expressed: 'it helped us develop our intercultural skills. We seek to promote the importance of […] communicating across cultures.' (quoted from the group's civic statement)

- *Co-operation skills* (at advanced level: "Involves other people in the planning and development of action plans to gain their commitment", p. 44). Each group member equally contributed to the production of the TikTok video. The fact that they all dressed up to take one role each (patient, doctor, etc.) and thought of appropriate linguistic expressions in each case is indicative of this skill at an advanced level. This is how the students described their collaborative work: 'Everything worked out perfectly, we accomplished everything we aimed for, and we learned plenty from our peers.'

- *Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication* (at intermediate level: "Can explain how different forms of language are used in different situations and contexts", p. 47). The message of togetherness the students sent out to the world (#wearetogether# and #unitywins#) might indicate their understanding of how language and communication work.

- *Knowledge and critical understanding of the world* (at advanced level, "Can outline diverse narratives from different perspectives about the historical forces and factors that have shaped the contemporary world", p. 51). The students carefully selected the characters for their video, which suggests their awareness of vulnerable groups in society.

Figure 3 summarizes the proficiency with which the students used and applied the RFCDC competences in Example 1.
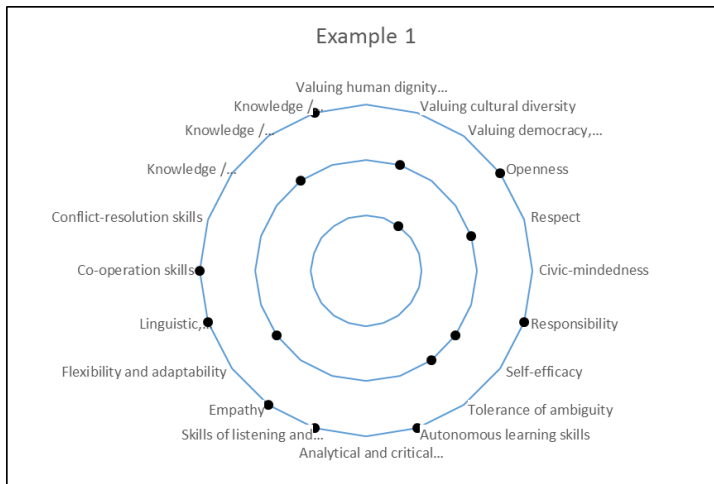

Figure 3. A radar chart representing the levels of proficiency displayed in Example 1

Example 2

Another group created a collage in which they explored different feelings and emotions related to the pandemic: loneliness, sadness, anxiety as well as tension and boredom (Image 1).

Image 1. Collage created by a mixed nationality group

The students showed appreciation for *cultural diversity* (as in the previous example) by using different artistic ways of self-expression such as dancing, painting, reading and so on, which in themselves are cultural expressions. They also showed care for one's emotional well-being and that of others by pointing out the dangers of the pandemic ('the number of deaths has increased', 'anxiety', 'tension', 'boredom', 'stress', 'danger', 'bad news') and the importance of addressing them ('stay at home', 'take care').

One of the US-based students, who came from Latin America, contributed to the collage with a drawing in which she is dancing (top right drawing in Image 1). The drawing was accompanied by the group's artistic description of it in this way:

> *[For her] this traditional Bolivian dance is more than just a hobby, it is therapy where she can let go of all those negative feelings she has been holding inside. It is what brings her comfort and peace especially during this time. When she feels unmotivated and down, she gets her uniform, a speaker, and water to practice outside in her backyard. (quoted from artistic statement)*

The extract indicates that this student demonstrated *self-efficacy* at an advanced level, i.e. showed "confidence that she knows how to handle unforeseen situations due to her resourcefulness" Council of Europe, 2018, Vol 2., p. 18), for instance by seeing the Bolivian dance not only as a hobby but as therapy. The student also showed *knowledge and critical understanding of self* (at least at basic level) by describing how "her thoughts and emotions influence her behaviour" (p. 46) ('When she feels unmotivated and down, she gets her uniform, a speaker, and water to practice outside').

Two other students contributed to the artistic creation by drawing different tech tools (e.g. computers and phones), which can be used for communication, learning and work in times of social distancing, and different activities (e.g. listening to music, painting, reading, photographing, exercising, dancing, watching theater performances, relaxing) (the two drawings on the left in Image 1). This way they demonstrated one more aspect of *self-efficacy*, at advance level, which is that they "feel secure in [their] abilities to meet life's challenges" (ibid.).

The fourth student depicted a female character in two different emotional states: on the left, bursting out in tears under the pressure of negative media news, uncertainty caused by coronavirus, and isolation; and, on the right, smiling with optimism and focusing on positive thoughts and activities (reading, dancing, mediating, listening to the music) (bottom right drawing in Image 1). In addition to demonstrating the high level of *self-efficacy* as the other three students, she showed at least an intermediate level of *tolerance of ambiguity*, i.e. she "deals with uncertainty in a positive and constructive manner" (ibid.) ('relax', 'breathe', 'hope', 'happiness', 'inspiration' in the drawing), and displayed *analytical and critical thinking skills,* also at intermediate level, by showing her ability to analyze "different points of view" (p. 36), for example by mentioning the ways in which the negative feelings can be challenged in her view, namely with 'books', 'theater', 'music' and 'humor'.

Overall, the whole group demonstrated the advanced level of *empathy* by "accurately identifying the feelings of others" (p. 39).

Figure 4 summarizes the RFCDC competences students mobilized and deployed in Example 2.
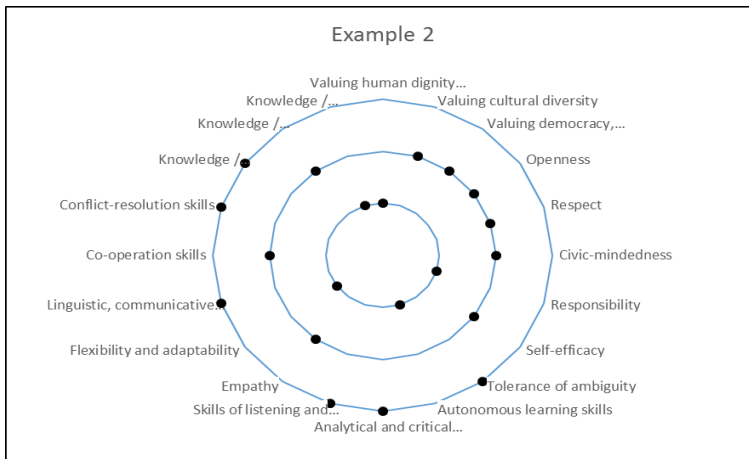

Figure 4. A radar chart representing the levels of proficiency displayed in Example 2

Social/civic action and students' civic statements

The second set of data was collected during the *action stage*, when the students were asked to seek an outlet for their artwork beyond the virtual classroom and to take action 'in the here and now' through engaging with real-life problems and issues. After that, the groups wrote their civic statements in which they reflected on their experiences.

Example 3

> Most US-based students focused on raising awareness about the COVID-pandemic dangers and related measures, and the vaccine, which then was still underway. Some of them engaged in community service; distributed masks, water, snacks, and hand sanitizers to Black Lives Matters protesters; and donated food. Most Argentinian students actively engaged in translating information on the virus for their family members; in helping homeless people particularly affected by the current COVID-19 crisis with food and warm clothes; in sharing project blogs on their social media; and in going to the outskirts of the city to help children with school subjects.

The kinds of social/civic action that our students engaged in (e.g. helping homeless people with warm clothes and food; school children on the outskirts of La Plata city with school subjects; or, Black Lives Matters protesters in Washington DC with water, snacks and masks) suggest they strongly *valued human dignity and human rights,* as well as *equality,* i.e. shared "the view that no one shall be subjected to inhumane […] treatment" (p. 26, intermediate level) and "that the legal system should have fair and transparent enforcement structures and procedures" (p. 28, advanced level).

In these actions the students also demonstrated their *civic-mindedness* by "exercising […] active citizenship at either local, national or global level" (p. 17, advanced level), and a *sense of responsibility* by "meet[ing] commitments to others" (p. 18, advanced level).

As in the previous examples, the students demonstrated high levels of *empathy* towards vulnerable members in society as well as *autonomous learning skills* (they were offered total freedom to identify the way in which they wanted to take social/civic action).

During the last week of the project, as a part of the *action stage*, the students were invited to reflect on their experiences and wrote civic statements. They reported having received very positive feedback from the communities, family members and friends with whom they shared their artistic creations or when they took social/civic action. Here are some extracts from the feedback our students received and shared in their statements (see Example 4):

Example 4

> I consider that it is a great video whose objective is to raise awareness about the current worldwide situation, and it also transmits a sense of hope by giving a lovely message. It's always good to remember we have each other… (feedback from a friend on TikTok video)
>
> It is really nice to see my students growing… (overall feedback from a former teacher on the students' project blog, posted on Instagram)
>
> I really enjoyed how the video illustrated the sense of unity by giving the same message in different languages. Most especially, I felt so good to see the Farsi language among them since I have barely seen my language in pandemic related arts and videos (an Iranian student from outside the project).

The fact that students selected these pieces of feedback for their statements serves as evidence that they paid careful attention to the formulation of their message and were able to activate and deploy their *linguistic and communication skills* at an advanced level. Both their actions and their reflections on such actions suggest that they had clear and *critical understanding* of the global issue of the pandemic, of the "interdependence of the global community" (advanced level, p. 51) and of their own role 'in the here and now'.

The next extract (Example 5) shows that when taking social/civic action, the students – in addition to *civic-mindedness* – activated the attitudes of *responsibility* ('to see how they were doing during quarantine')*, self-efficacy* ('we hope…we can help others')*,* and *tolerance of ambiguity* ('talking to people we did not know', 'adjust to a different way of living'), all at an advanced level (pp. 31-33):

Example 5

> […] we had a great time administrating the Instagram account and talking to people we did not know, to see how they were doing during quarantine. We hope that in showing other people how different life is with coronavirus, we can help others adjust to a different way of living. (quoted from a civic statement)

The students reflected on their participation in the intercultural virtual project as a beneficial and 'mind-opening' experience for themselves and for the people with whom they shared their project work (see Example 6):

Example 6

> This whole experience has been really *mind-opening for me and for the ones I shared on social media my group project with. My group decided to upload our creation on multiple platforms.* We created a blog post, an Instagram story post, and on Facebook. Personally, I feel that posting these on Facebook and Instagram *brought a lot of joy to not only my friends but also my family members.* I think that since I have been pretty quiet throughout these times […] taking a class right now and […] focusing an entire project on the pandemic and making it a point that *we're all in this together* [helped me a lot]. The people we shared our projects with *all felt like everyone is going through this* and they can confirm that because it was stated that my group had three girls from Argentina in it and they all have the same emotions about the pandemic as we do in the US. *We also wanted to call to the attention of mental health and how the majority of us are feeling anxious and lonely in these times and how it is so important to remember to stay in touch with your loved ones so you are reminded that you aren't so lonely after all.* My group did not pick a certain age group to target; *we* just *wanted to share our work with everyone and anyone* who wants to read about it. *We would like our art-based creation to have a humbling effect on everyone* because we feel that since everyone is going through the same thing *it's smart to not lash out and freak out about the change. Our creation will reach our target group of everyone* by keeping it on our social media platforms and raising awareness about it. (quoted from a US-based student's reflection, emphasis added)

The italicized text in the above-quoted extract confirms this group's *openness* ('we just wanted to share our work with everyone and anyone') because they were "seeking contact with others" (advanced level, p. 17). Also, it serves as evidence of their *self-efficacy* ('My group decided to upload our creation on multiple platforms', 'Our creation will reach our target group of everyone', 'We would like our art-based creation to have a humbling effect on everyone') because the reflection demonstrated their confidence and resourcefulness in handling difficult situations (advanced level,

Finally, this extract proves strong *tolerance of ambiguity* ('it's smart to not lash out and freak out about the change') and high level of *empathy* ('the majority of us are feeling anxious and lonely in these time', 'it is so important to remember to stay in touch with your loved one').

Finally, the following extract (Example 7) also shows a high level of *responsibility* ('we need to continue to be safe') and *civic-mindedness* ('so we can move past this tragic time'):

Example 7

> *People need to take this virus seriously* because we are losing so many people due to COVID-19. This moment in time is a time that we won't forget. […] *we need to continue to be safe and take precautions, so we can move past this tragic time*. (quoted from a civic statement, emphasis added)

All the competences mobilized and deployed during the *action stage* (examples 3-7) and the corresponding levels of proficiency are summarized in Figure 5. It is important to mention that the collected data did not contain evidence that our students had applied conflict resolution skills, but in intercultural projects of this kind, situations may arise in which such skills need to be activated.
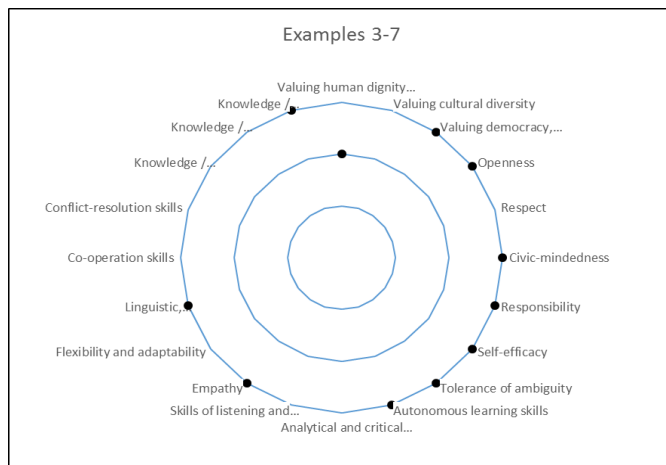

Figure 5. A radar chart representing the levels of proficiency displayed in Examples 3-7

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis allows us to tentatively suggest that our intercultural citizenship project created opportunities for students to mobilize and deploy competences which would not otherwise have been called upon in routine pedagogy.

Our answer to Research Question 1 is that the data demonstrate which of the 20 components were mobilized and deployed at certain stages of our project, and at what level of proficiency. It also confirms that the RFCDC competences are activated in clusters, as discussed in Volume 1 of the Council of Europe (2018), in an adaptive manner depending on specific situations requiring

certain democratic and intercultural competences. For example, *civic mindedness* was activated in a more salient way at the *action stage* (cf. Figure 5 to Figures 3 and 4).

In response to Research Question 2, our findings seem to indicate that short-term intercultural virtual exchanges *can* serve as effective pedagogical tools for mobilizing students' democratic and intercultural citizenship competences. However, we cannot draw any conclusions about cause and effect of the experience on the development or change in students' competences since we did not have a control group or a baseline analysis of students' competences before the project began.

What we would emphasize however is that our project demonstrated that it was possible and useful to use the RFCDC as a means of systematizing our analysis of the data. Furthermore, we suggest that in such pedagogical projects in the future, it may be worthwhile to share the analysis with students and/or use the portfolios which have been developed to accompany the RFCDC with students so that they can chart their own competences and, over time and perhaps over further such projects, analyze the change in their self-assessments.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the cross-curricular potential of projects of this kind to mobilize RFCDC competences. Possible areas for development in our project could have involved other disciplines such as health (including mental health) and the arts as obvious choices, but also other potentially controversial areas such as politics, economic and social development, and international relations. In addition, specifically in English as foreign language learning contexts such as the Argentinian setting, it is almost always essential for teachers to foster pedagogic practices that achieve important educational aims of the kind we have described here in terms of democratic competences but also more instrumental aims linked to linguistic development. After all, the course in the Argentinian setting was an English language course. The question of whether by mobilizing the RFCDC competences EFL students concomitantly improve their linguistic and communicative competence is therefore also significant. In other words, does the activation and deployment of RFCDC competences lead to language learning? Previous analyses of cases of intercultural citizenship education in the EFL classroom in higher education in the Argentinian context have shown that the complementarity of educational and instrumental aims leads to language learning in the form of increased motivation, language awareness, vocabulary expansion, and plurilingual and multiliteracies development (see Porto, 2019). These analyses have not focused on the RFCDC competences and this area deserves further investigation.

We must note another limitation of our study. It was set in two higher education contexts targeting adult students. As mentioned by Barrett and Golubeva (2022), not all competences are suitable for pedagogic intervention with all age groups.

> Some of the competences, such as openness and empathy, may be targeted from a relatively early age at pre-school and primary school. However, others, such as knowledge and critical understanding of politics, law and economies, are more suitable for targeting in upper secondary school and higher education. This is not to say that criticality (e.g. the ability to make critical judgements about equality, equity and fairness) is not present in young children – it clearly is (see, e.g. Killen et al., 2018) – nor that openness and empathy are not important during adulthood – they clearly are (e.g. Butrus & Witenberg, 2013); instead, the suggestion is that different competences may be more suitable for promotion through education at different levels of education. (pp. 74-75)

Finally, political, cultural and other concerns regarding the targeting of particular competences through education in specific contexts have been noted (Council of Europe, 2018, Vol. 1). Specifically, the question of the transferability of the RFCDC in non-European contexts is an important point. Although the Council of Europe is silent on the transferability of the RFCDC, the impact of the CEFR worldwide suggests that it is likely that the RFCDC will be picked up and used in other continents. Our study shows that this transferability was feasible in our American

contexts, which involved countries usually identified as 'the North' (USA) and 'the South' (Argentina). The question of whether this transferability leads to the imposition of Northern, in this case European, educational policy (and therefore projects of knowledge) in peripheral contexts is at the forefront and merits theoretical discussion and empirical investigation.

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