

## Practicing empathy through a virtual exchange course: A study depicting polish and Lebanese students

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**Abstract:** This study examines the role of empathy in online learning by analyzing the experiences of Polish and Lebanese students enrolled in the Global Understanding (GU) virtual exchange course. While empathy has been widely acknowledged as a critical component of interpersonal and academic interaction, most prior research has examined its development in face-to-face contexts, with limited attention to structured virtual environments. The purpose of this study is to address this gap by investigating whether and how empathy can be cultivated through intercultural dialogue and collaborative online projects. The design follows a case-oriented framework, and a qualitative methodology was adopted, drawing on participant reflections, instructor observations, and project feedback. The approach was intercultural and learner-centered, conducted during five videoconferencing sessions and a joint group project. The findings highlight both emotional and cognitive engagement, expressed in openness, curiosity, and respect toward cultural differences. Emerging themes included academic life, family traditions, religion, and stereotypes, which encouraged reflection on similarities and differences. Instructor reflections confirmed cautious yet meaningful engagement with sensitive issues. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that empathy can be developed in technology-supported contexts. The practical implications suggest that structured virtual exchange fosters empathy, intercultural awareness, and readiness for global citizenship.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural interaction, Cultural awareness, Empathy, Virtual communication.

### 1. Introduction

The rapid growth of online learning has been influenced by factors such as the establishment of new universities, technological developments, and the flexible nature of online programs [1]. This transformation accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when institutions worldwide were compelled to adopt digital platforms [2]. Consequently, online learning environments have become increasingly multicultural, with instructors and students needing to navigate cultural differences in beliefs, values, and preferences [3]. Such contexts highlight the importance of intercultural competence and empathy as essential components for meaningful communication and collaboration.

Empathy is a central element of interpersonal communication and can be understood through two dimensions: empathic accuracy, or the ability to perceive and understand the thoughts and feelings of others [4] and supportive responses, or compassionate reactions to another's affect [5]. These dimensions are critical in fostering both social and academic empathy, which have been shown to enhance program continuation, strengthen analytic skills, and create a sense of belonging in virtual learning settings [6]. Previous research has identified empathy as a condition that improves satisfaction, facilitates interactions, and assists learners in overcoming barriers [7, 8].

Although traditionally associated with face-to-face interactions [9, 10] recent studies demonstrate that empathy can also emerge in digital contexts. Findings show that even text-based communication

may support empathy, depending on the topic and structure of interactions [11, 12]. Moreover, video conferencing has been recognized as an effective tool for displaying non-verbal signals and supporting empathic exchanges [13, 14]. Other studies highlight the potential of virtual exchanges to promote cultural understanding and reduce prejudice [15-17].

While these studies emphasize the role of virtual platforms in promoting empathy, they often remain general and lack focus on how empathy is specifically cultivated within structured educational programs. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing the experiences of Polish and Lebanese students enrolled in the Global Understanding (GU) virtual course. It aims to explore how cross-cultural projects and online collaboration foster empathy and intercultural awareness, guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the experiences of empathy in the virtual exchange course impact overall communication and learning outcomes for Polish and Lebanese students?
2. To what extent do collaborative projects in the virtual exchange course contribute to transcending cultural boundaries and promoting cross-cultural awareness among students from Poland and Lebanon?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

This study was conducted as part of the Global Understanding (GU) course organized by Global Partners in Education (GPE). The course is designed to raise cultural awareness and foster intercultural communication through collaborative online learning. A qualitative design was selected to allow for an in-depth understanding of how empathy emerges in a virtual exchange environment. Data collection relied on multiple sources, including observations, participant feedback, and project assessments, to capture diverse perspectives on empathy development.

### 2.2. Participants

The participants included students from Poland and Lebanon who took part in five virtual meetings and one collaborative project. Sessions addressed topics such as academic life, family traditions, religion, and stereotypes. A total of 18 students participated, although not all provided complete feedback. Demographic details such as gender and year of study were varied, but all participants were undergraduate students using English as the medium of communication.

## 3. Data Collection

Students engaged in synchronous video conferencing sessions supported by collaborative tools for project completion. After each meeting, participants submitted written reflections on the experiences. In addition, instructors documented classroom observations and recorded impressions of student engagement. At the end of the course, students provided open-ended feedback describing their learning and perceptions of intercultural interaction.

### 3.1. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and students were assured of confidentiality. To protect privacy, no names or identifying details were used in reporting, and reflections were presented in a way that preserved anonymity.

## 4. Results

The qualitative analysis of student reflections, instructor observations, and feedback revealed several themes connected to the development of empathy and intercultural awareness during the virtual

exchange course. To preserve anonymity, student responses are labeled with identifiers (P = Poland, L = Lebanon).

#### 4.1. Academic Life and Cultural Exchange

Discussions on academic life provided students with opportunities to reflect on similarities and differences between the two systems. Polish students expressed curiosity about the Lebanese context and recognized both contrasts and commonalities. For example, one participant noted:

- *“It was interesting to get a little glimpse of life within another country, in this instance through actually talking to their inhabitants”* (P3).

Other students emphasized the language dimension, praising the proficiency of their peers:

- *“The Lebanese students speak good English, and this language can also break the barrier between these two cultures”* (P5).

All nine Polish students indicated that they appreciated the conversations and valued the opportunity to learn directly from their Lebanese counterparts.

#### 4.2. Family Traditions and Values

Students identified family traditions as an area of both difference and connection. Lebanese family practices, including collectivist values and distinctive wedding customs, attracted strong interest. As one Polish student reflected:

- *“I was shocked (...) but in a good way at how different some traditions are”* (P7).

Several participants highlighted Christmas as a meaningful point of comparison, while others discussed differences in marriage practices:

- *“People in Lebanon get married later than in Poland; the general marriage rate is lower than that of our home country”* (P2).

Such reflections suggest that conversations on their family life deepened cultural awareness and encouraged students to reconsider their own assumptions.

#### 4.3. Religion and Sensitive Topics

Religion was perceived as a challenging but rewarding topic. Some Polish students described the discussion as difficult due to cultural sensitivity, while others valued the openness of their Lebanese peers. One student commented:

- *“I liked it because I could present my point of view about my faith and the meaning of life”* (P4).

Topics such as reincarnation and Lebanon’s religious diversity were highlighted:

- *“The concept of reincarnation was the most socially relevant concept among the ones mentioned”* (P6).

These conversations demonstrated students’ ability to navigate sensitive issues with empathy and respect, building understanding despite differences.

#### 4.4. Stereotypes and Prejudice

Engagement with stereotypes prompted critical reflection. Students recognized both positive and negative cultural assumptions. A Polish student observed:

- *“There are a lot of crazy stereotypes, also the negative ones, for example, that Lebanese people are racist and terrorists”* (P8).

Such reflections encouraged dialogue on overcoming bias and the need for mutual trust. Students also noted symbolic cultural practices, such as the meaning of colors and clothing. A Lebanese student remarked:

- *“Even though I did not know much about Poland, Polish people are friendly”* (L4).

Through these exchanges, students confronted stereotypes and developed more nuanced perspectives.

#### 4.5. Collaborative Project and Emotional Connection

The group project allowed participants to apply intercultural learning and practice. Both Polish and Lebanese students emphasized feelings of unity and shared purpose:

- “*There are some differences between Lebanon and Poland, but more or less we all think the same way*” (P1).

Lebanese students stressed the personal and academic benefits:

- “*The evolution of this course is beneficial to me and my major a lot*” (L2).
- “*This course increased my confidence and assisted me in my major*” (L6).

Participants described forming genuine emotional bonds, often extending beyond the course. For example:

- “*When my partner was sick and did not come to class again, I felt sorry and contacted her via WhatsApp to ask about her health*” (L7).

Such accounts illustrate that empathy was not only conceptual but also relational, shaping how students responded to one another’s experiences.

#### 4.6. Instructor Reflections

Instructor observations added an important pedagogical perspective. The Polish instructor noted that students often avoided controversial questions, preferring responses such as “*it depends*”. However, curiosity and willingness to learn were consistently evident.

The Lebanese instructor emphasized the students’ enthusiasm for cultural similarities and a respectful approach to diversity. In one instance, a student refused to ask a sensitive question about political relations, demonstrating growing cultural sensitivity.

Both instructors agreed that the course fostered empathy, openness, and intercultural awareness, even while revealing challenges such as slow communication and occasional hesitancy in informal exchanges.

### 5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the Global Understanding (GU) course supported the development of empathy, intercultural awareness, and communication skills among Polish and Lebanese students. The themes identified in the results provide evidence that virtual exchanges can foster both cognitive and affective aspects of empathy, though in ways that are shaped by cultural context and the structure of the course.

The tables and figures below offer a structured overview of the themes emerging from students’ reflections, instructor notes, and cross-cultural dialogue. Table 1 highlights the six main themes, each illustrated by participant quotes, while Figure 1 visualizes the relative salience of each theme. Taken together, these results reinforce the argument that virtual exchanges, when guided effectively, can nurture empathy and intercultural understanding across diverse student populations.

**Table 1.**  
Themes Identified in Student Reflections.

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Quotes
Academic Life & Cultural Exchange	Curiosity about academic differences; appreciation of English proficiency	"It was interesting to get a glimpse of life within another country" (P3)
Family Traditions & Values	Surprise at marriage customs; interest in holidays (Christmas, weddings)	"I was shocked (...) but in a good way at how different some traditions are" (P7)
Religion & Sensitive Topics	Mixed feelings—challenging but rewarding; shared diverse perspectives	"I liked it because I could present my point of view about my faith" (P4)
Stereotypes & Prejudice	Recognition of negative stereotypes; re-evaluation through dialogue	"Lebanese people are racist and terrorists" (P8) [rejected stereotype]
Collaborative Project & Emotional Connection	Bonds beyond class, concern for partners, sense of unity	"When my partner was sick ... I contacted her via WhatsApp" (L7)
Instructor Reflections	Polish students cautious; Lebanese students respectful & curious	"Student refused to ask a sensitive question ... showing sensitivity"



**Figure 1.**  
Thematic Distribution of Reflections.

### 5.1. Theme Salience and Interpretation

As illustrated in Figure 1, the most frequently referenced themes were *Academic Life and Cultural Exchange* and *Collaborative Project, and Emotional Connection*. This indicates that students felt most engaged when conversations were grounded in relatable experiences (such as academic routines) or when they collaborated on a shared task. These findings align with Lin, et al. [9] who argue that structured academic dialogue fosters trust and empathy in virtual settings. Importantly, the frequency of reflections in these categories underscores that empathy is not merely abstract but often rooted in shared daily practices and collaborative achievements.

### 5.2. Academic Life and Linguistic Bridges

Students' reflections on academic life revealed curiosity and openness to difference. The appreciation of linguistic ability, for example, highlights how communication in a shared language may reduce barriers and encourage mutual respect. These observations align with Weisberg, et al. [11] who found that empathy can be expressed even in text-based or second-language contexts, and with Stibbards [8] who emphasized the importance of empathy in building supportive learning environments. Students'

emphasis on language proficiency (Table 1) suggests that a shared linguistic medium facilitated mutual respect and openness, where the GU course provided an environment where language functioned as a bridge rather than a barrier. This also highlights the importance of English as a lingua franca in intercultural exchanges, serving both cognitive and affective empathy.

### *5.3. Family Traditions, Religion, and Social Values*

Engagement with family traditions provided opportunities for cultural comparison and reflection. Students' surprise at differences in marriage customs or holiday practices indicates the potential for intercultural exchanges to foster curiosity rather than rejection. This finding supports earlier work by Commander, et al. [15] who noted that virtual exchanges encourage willingness to engage positively with cultural differences. The discussions also illustrate how empathy can extend beyond emotional reactions to include recognition of social norms and values, reflecting the cognitive dimension of empathy [4]. The discussions on family life and religion (Table 1) exemplify how virtual exchanges can expose students to diverse cultural scripts. Similarly, while religion was acknowledged as sensitive, many participants expressed appreciation for the chance to articulate personal beliefs. This resonates with Agosta [12] who emphasized that authentic emotional communication is possible in mediated contexts, and with Sholikhin and Muniroh [14] who showed that digital settings can support meaningful empathic interactions. Such findings indicate that carefully guided discussions can encourage both emotional connection and perspective-taking.

### *5.4. Stereotypes and Prejudice*

The theme of stereotypes revealed how students confronted preconceived notions and reconsidered media-driven assumptions. For instance, the rejection of negative stereotypes about Lebanese people indicated that direct contact may counter bias. This echoes Branham [16] who demonstrated that virtual immersive contact can reduce prejudice. Similarly, the reflections on clothing and color symbolism suggest that intercultural interaction fosters awareness of cultural codes that are often overlooked. These outcomes point to the behavioral dimension of empathy, in which students adjust attitudes and responses when engaging with "the other" [5]. A striking aspect of the findings lies in the way students confronted stereotypes. As noted in Table 1, negative preconceptions (e.g., linking Lebanese identity to terrorism) were actively questioned and replaced with more nuanced perspectives. The GU course thus demonstrates how empathy can manifest behaviorally, leading to shifts in students' assumptions and attitudes. Such dialogue, even when difficult, appears to be a fertile ground for empathy development.

### *5.5. Collaborative Project and Emotional Connection*

The collaborative project strengthened both unity and emotional connection among participants. Expressions of concern for absent partners or feelings of closeness despite distance illustrate how empathy manifests in relational terms. Such evidence supports Hoter, et al. [17] who highlighted how virtual worlds can create emotionally significant experiences, and Makweya and Sepadi [6] who stressed the role of empathy in building inclusive learning environments. While some logistical challenges emerged, the overall outcomes indicate that structured tasks can promote both intercultural learning and interpersonal bonding.

### *5.6. Instructor Reflections*

Instructor perspectives provided valuable triangulation. Polish students' tendency to avoid controversial topics suggested a cautious engagement with cultural difference, while Lebanese students' emphasis on respect and curiosity reflects positive dispositions toward diversity. These observations reinforce the idea that empathy is not uniform but context-dependent, varying in expressions across cultural and communicative settings [9, 10]. The instructors' accounts further confirm that empathy in

virtual exchanges extends beyond emotional resonance to include sensitivity, moral judgment, and communicative strategies.

### 5.7. Overall Interpretation

Taken together, these findings indicate that empathy can be cultivated through virtual exchanges when activities are structured to encourage dialogue, reflection, and collaboration. However, the evidence remains tentative, given the small sample and reliance on qualitative reflections. As such, the conclusions should be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of empathy in online learning [1, 2, 7] suggesting that empathy is not only preserved but can be enhanced in intercultural, technology-mediated contexts. By synthesizing these themes, the tables and figures clarify that empathy in virtual exchanges is multidimensional—cognitive (understanding differences), affective (sharing feelings), and behavioral (adjusting actions). While challenges remain, the GU course demonstrates that technology-mediated dialogue can move beyond information exchange toward genuine intercultural understanding.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored how a Global Understanding (GU) virtual exchange course supported empathy and intercultural awareness among Polish and Lebanese students. The analysis of reflections, feedback, and instructor observations indicates that virtual learning environments can foster both emotional and cognitive forms of empathy, even when participants are geographically distant.

In relation to the first research question, findings suggest that students' experiences of empathy influenced their communication and learning outcomes by encouraging openness, curiosity, and respect towards cultural differences. Conversations on academic life, family traditions, and religion provided opportunities for reflection, while collaborative projects promoted confidence and emotional connection. These outcomes confirm that empathy can be developed in online interactions, complementing previous studies on the role of technology in supporting communication and affective learning [11, 12].

Regarding the second research question, the results indicate that collaborative projects enabled students to transcend cultural boundaries and develop cross-cultural awareness. Dialogue on stereotypes, values, and traditions challenged preconceived notions and promoted intercultural understanding. This supports earlier findings that virtual exchanges can enhance participants' willingness to engage with others and reduce prejudice [15, 16].

While the study contributes evidence that empathy may be cultivated in structured virtual settings, its conclusions are limited by the small sample size, the short duration of the program, and reliance on qualitative data. Future research could expand the sample to include more diverse cultural groups, extend the timeframe of participation, and incorporate standardized instruments such as pre- and post-course surveys. These steps would strengthen the generalizability of findings and provide more systematic evidence of how empathy develops in online learning contexts.

Overall, the study underscores the potential of virtual exchange courses to foster not only linguistic and academic outcomes but also interpersonal and intercultural growth. By demonstrating that empathy can emerge in online collaboration, the findings highlight the value of integrating structured intercultural programs into higher education curricula to prepare students as responsible and culturally sensitive global citizens.

### Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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