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VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE AS A HIGH-IMPACT LEARNING TOOL FOR MORE INCLUSIVE, EQUITABLE AND DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

Galina Siergiejczyk [galina.siergiejczyk@colorado.edu], GRAP, University of Colorado at Boulder [https://www.colorado.edu/globalstudiesrap], N 201, Arnett Residence Hall 406 UCB, Boulder, United States of America

Abstract

While technology-assisted learning has become commonplace in education, its applications are rarely examined along geopolitical and cultural perspectives that reveal certain shared and vastly distinct localized practices in evolving pedagogy and cultural dynamics. For developing countries such as Uzbekistan, collaborating virtually with a university in the U.S. may represent both a technological and socio-cultural challenge. Conducting a virtual international project, nonetheless, offers a unique chance to experience *another* culture in real time through its people, exposing reductionist perceptions of *other* cultures and humanizing that *other* through community-generated dialogue. Virtual intercultural exchanges advance intercultural communicative competency and constitute an effective format for high-impact learning practices that advance students' understanding and appreciation of diversity, equity and inclusion in traditional and online classrooms. This surveys student evaluations of a pilot Virtual International Exchange (VIE) completed between U.S. and Uzbek students in 2018, and underpins a theoretical framework for the benefits of concurring *cognitive dissonance* for the benefit of open, equitable and inclusive pedagogical models.

Abstract in Polish

Międzynarodowe interakcje cyfrowe wykorzystywane jako dynamiczne sytuacje dydaktyczne znacznie zwiększają przyswajanie wiedzy w zakresie kompetencji międzykulturowych. Wysoka wartość omawianych kompetencji uwzględnia pogłębione badania nad innowacyjnymi rozwiązaniami stosowanymi w otwartej edukacji. Podczas gdy uczenie się wspomagane technologią stało się powszechne, nowe międzynarodowe przedsięwzięcia, takie jak Erasmus Plus Virtual Exchange wskazują, że przyszłość edukacji będzie polegać na otwartym dostępie i uczeniu się opartym na współpracy. Takie zastosowanie rzadko badane jest pod względem wzbogacenia procesu dydaktycznego poprzez wspieranie współtworzenia i pokonywania różnic kulturowych. Uwzględnienie takich innowacyjnych praktyk w edukacji cyfrowej może przynieść nieocenione korzyści. Poprzez międzynarodowe interakcje cyfrowe w czasie rzeczywistym, studenci odkrywają dla siebie uniwersalne wartości, tworzą wspólnie i z poszanowaniem różnic kulturowych, zwiększają poziom zaangażowania oraz odkrywają konkretnie zlokalizowane praktyki pedagogiczne, administracyjne, a także dynamikę kulturową. Nasza analiza podkreśla zindywidualizowaną wartość innowacyjnych praktyk dydaktycznych dla współpracujących w procesie poznawania innej kultury w czasie rzeczywistym, która umożliwia eksperymentalne odkrywanie „inności" (Finley i McNair, 2013). Wirtualna wymiana międzynarodowa (VIE) oferuje dostęp do struktur komunikacji międzykulturowej, promuje nabywanie umiejętności miękkich (w globalnym kontekście współpracy) oraz zwiększa zrozumienie i docenienie przez uczniów różnorodności, równości i integracji w klasach tradycyjnych i cyfrowych. Dla krajów rozwijających się, takich jak Uzbekistan, współpraca wirtualna z uniwersytetem w USA może stanowić zarówno wyzwanie technologiczne, logistyczne, społeczno-kulturowe, jak i cenną wartość: odważny

innowacyjny „skok wiary" jako szansę na wykazanie gotowości technologicznej, oświadczenie postępu praktyk edukacyjnych i ukierunkowanie do współpracy międzynarodowej ze strony wykładowców, jak i władz lokalnych. W tym artykule przeanalizowano korzyści płynące z takiej wirtualnej współpracy międzynarodowej poprzez ocenę pilotażowego projektu VIE, przeprowadzonego wśród studentów z USA i Uzbekistanu, w oparciu o zasady teorii uczenia się o kulturze, badań procesu poznawania innego języka (SLA) i neuronaukę kontemplatywną.

Keywords: intercultural competency, community-based online learning, diversity

Introduction

Online courses are becoming commonplace additions to traditional education in many educational institutions as part of a shared move to capitalize on increasingly popular and in-demand distance learning, accessible learning, and other alternative formats of digital education, affording certificates, badges, and degrees. Concurrent to this evolution of online learning is the process of increasing valuation of *intercultural competence* as a communicative skill for a progressively more globalized professional of the future world (Bohinski & Leventhal, 2015; Byram, 2000; Johnson, 2004; etc.). Arguably, one of the most important intersections between these two trends is the need for a meaningful and affordable (accessible) social component that also serves as an opportunity to gain a valued cross-cultural competence (Elboubekri, 2017).

> *"Intercultural competence is [the ability] to see relationships between different cultures – both internal and external to a society – and to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. It also encompasses the ability to critically or analytically understand that one's 'own and other cultures' perspective is culturally determined rather than natural." (Byram, 2000)*

While conventional in-person education rarely relies on active interculturally collaborative projects in real time, and online course formats (including MOOCs) are essentially devoid of any form of social engagement, neither of these models allows a meaningful opportunity to obtain intercultural competence – the very skill universities are demanding that the faculty instruct as part of the learning outcomes for language and culture courses, in particular. Teaching intercultural competency in a foreign language-instruction setting to a contemporary student calls for improved, informed and adaptive contextualization attempt, rooted in real-time experiments, practical projects and learning scenarios organized around authentic interaction with peers and colleagues from the country functioning in a target language (TL).

Thus, cultural and intercultural competency is a skill that in itself demands a clearer theoretical redefinition along the newly identified markers of possible cultures in the areas of economic and social class, age groups, genders and sexual orientations, religious preferences, military experiences, etc., as a socio-political and creative process that is necessarily coloured or conditioned by historical factors, social rituals, and geopolitical organization of the country of origin. How do we engage in a meaningful, respectful and educated exploration of our many cultures and our cultures' assumptions about the roles of individuals? How do we critically re-evaluate the reductionist stereotypes about our cultures? How do we maintain some form of attribution in the world of technologically engulfing and inter-blending of cultures? What are the tools needed for recognizing depth in contemporary departures from and re-enactments of cultural practices ingrained in our social and political rituals?

As our experimental virtual international exchange conducted August-December 2017 between students in Uzbekistan and the Western U.S. has demonstrated, this activity proves beneficial not only for blended and online courses – be they Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) or other

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digital course formats offered at traditional Universities – but also adds considerable value to students in traditional residential (in-person) courses. Furthermore, from our initial reports and survey analysis, we found that such virtual international collaborations deliver rich contextual data across a variety of parameters, such as revealing established practices concerning the use of technological tools.

These practices, we found, carry the constraints of reduced accessibility based on the limitations of available Internet access, as well as other limitations revealing particular local socio-cultural norms in approaching international (educational) collaborations, which established specific parameters for our communication during digital meet-ups.

While these and more will be addressed to a degree, the focus of the current analysis will be two select observations resulting from our pilot of a virtual international exchange project (VIE): First, the initial comparative review of the VIE between partner teams in U.S. and Uzbekistan; and second, the larger picture of the benefits gleaned from this intercultural experience for the American students. The second of the two interrelated foci will further direct the reader to potential large-scope benefits of VIEs in both digital and traditional education as a means of advancing inclusivity and cultural diversity in experiential learning. In this capacity, VIEs can serve as prized high-impact learning practices allowing a direct experience of another culture, which may otherwise be limited or inaccessible.

Context within Discipline

Current online courses, as well as hybrid/digital formats of traditional on-campus course lack either a meaningful social interaction component or practical intercultural communicative practices, and thus can benefit from introduction of a new element to traditional coursework calling for community-based collaborative interaction that is intentionally cross-cultural and computer-facilitated. While Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL) models continue to inspire project-length community building in courses; and similar effects are noticed in community-engagement efforts in service-learning; live (online) community-based intercultural collaborative practices remain understudied.

Inherent limitations exist in both digital and in-person courses, where a meaningful cross-cultural interaction is impossible to simulate or keep updated with the continuously changing modern cultural and political landscapes. There is, therefore, a particular value in creating a specific modality of virtual international collaboration, either project-based or unstructured (dialogical), to allow the students an opportunity to capture the cultural context appropriate to their time and professional interests. This paper surveys the results of a Pilot VIE with its unveiling of region-specific digital education practices as well as future potentialities of a Virtual International Exchange plus a regular class (also offered in a hybrid/online format) as a solution to designing high-impact learning opportunities for collaborating students and international partner institutions at scale.

Literature

Students of online courses often complain about a lack of social interaction that contributes to dwindling interest and low completion rates. Creating course components that are based on collaborative and community-driven interactions "offer promising models for more explicit engagement" (The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). Earlier versions of computer conferencing, moderated FL chatrooms, as well as University-generated FL-themed forums have been proven effective in fostering meaningful practice of communicative competences, as well as acquisition of intercultural competencies through exchange of requests, reflections, arguments and dialogues online (Rankin, 1996; Dysthe, 1996). Our VIE, as a version of such co-curricular

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international online collaboration, is more akin to a current community-driven learning model, named Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which according to Hans de Wit "combines the four essential dimensions of real virtual mobility: a collaborative exercise of teachers and students; applied use of online technology and interaction; international dimensions; and it is integrated into the learning process" (de Wit, 2013).

Admittedly, current trends in implementation of MOOCs and other digital course formats serving large numbers of students and excluding a possibility of a viable social engagement in person see their success contingent upon similar community-driven online collaborations. In the increasingly connected global community of professionals, new educational initiatives emerge to create just that: digital collaborative programs, courses and degrees. Consider Erasmus Plus – a Virtual Exchange Initiative – and its promising accomplishments in not only connecting students to their peers abroad, but also offering collaborative science projects and joint degrees across universities in several nation-states (European Commission Report, 2017). Following the Leiden University Innovation Report, university-level collaborations with international partners are particularly advantageous in "exploring opportunities, developing new policies, programmes & integration of unbundled services, like MOOCs" (p.51 *Online Learning Lab Innovation Report 16/17*). On par with the increasing incorporation of MOOCs at universities, and an ongoing quest to foster greater accessibility of courses to diverse student populations, including traditional on-campus students, universities strive to capture an elusive and significant learning skill of the globalized economy of the future: Intercultural competence, a recent buzzword in FL instruction. It is traditionally taught via literature analysis, surveys of cultural history and cultural artifacts, as part of the learning goals in foreign language and culture courses in a variety of disciplines.

Since the introduction of digital technologies, a noted and dramatic change has occurred in the very process of teaching intercultural competence, apparently shifting the content-based acquisition of this skill to a communicative-focused and dialogically produced variable that may be becoming harder to pin down in the mutable sea of online multilingualism, appropriation and cultural hybridity (Block, 2014). In her review of the changing elements of instruction and value along the "axes of modernity" in current digitally-bound FL instruction, Kramsch (2016) points out a specific shift from "language learning as use value" of the 1970s and '80s to "language learning as exchange value" of the 2000s. She cites Heller and Duchéne's (2012) "Language in Late Capitalism: Pride and Profit", to confirm that, indeed, in some cases appropriate and educated language use can be "promoted as an object of pride by the modern nation-state" and as such is now becoming seen as a "source of profit in a globalized economy" (Kramsch, 2016; p.301).

While much attention has been spent on criticizing the changing values of communicative competence in foreign language (FL) instruction (see, e.g., Block, 2010; Block et al., 2012; Block & Cameron, 2002; Heller, 2003; Kramsch, 2014) and intercultural competence (IC) (Benett, 1986; 1993; Taylor, 1994; Rankin, 1997). However, according to some researchers such as Fantini (1991), a continuously shifting landscape of communicative competence is perfectly poised to equip the professionals of tomorrow with cultural expertise necessary for their success. Thus, preparing our graduates for the duties of a globalized professional community would necessarily include a certain amount of practice in the area of intercultural communication and collaboration. Johnson (2004) further advocates for a more inclusive approach in digitally-assisted SLA, confirming that such theories as Vygotsky's (1934) socio-cultural language and identity formation and Bakhtin's (1981) dialogical "multivoicedness" offer a valuable perspective on the co-creation of cultural and linguistic identities in communal discussion. In what follows, we will further elaborate on the potentialities of such dialogue-driven sharing and discovering cultural identities, based on our pilot VIE.

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Summary of a Pilot VIE with Uzbekistan: Project goals and format

In our pilot exchange program, our goals were rather limited to an opportunity to connect our students from distinctly different cultural environments, collaborate on implementing new presentation skills from a shared MOOC content, and the students to initiate open dialogue on select cultural practices in U.S. and Uzbekistan, so as to advance their intercultural competences. Our intention was to apply the current technological advancements in digitally-supported education, such as MOOC for shared learning content and Zoom/Skype for community-based discussions. The major aim of this project was to actively involve our students in a collaborative intercultural learning of a soft skill of presenting or public speaking while learning more about our respective cultures.

Initial Goals for the Pilot VIE

- Evaluate how students rate themselves in intercultural competency pre- and post-online collaboration with their international peers.
- Test out a new course project using a shared MOOC for content and Virtual International Exchange for discussions.
- Evaluate students' social engagement along gender lines, as well as their personal interest in another culture.

This project was initially designed as a way to solve a problem of missing direct socio-cultural experience in the target language for Russian language learners at CU-Boulder. By the time we have identified potential collaborators – O'zbeiston Davlat Jahon Tillari Universiteti, Uzbekistan – we determined that it would be most beneficial to open up this virtual exchange to students in other courses, such one that with related thematic interest and guided by the same instructor as the Russian-language class. The second group of students who were invited to the pilot VIE were freshmen studying the history of sports during the Cold War, prominently focusing on the Soviet Union as its major player. Thus, our original target population of Russian-language learners was quickly supplemented and eventually fully replaced by the learners of historical context, examining a variety of countries in the former Soviet Union and thus, arguably, presented a greater value to the second group of students.

As a result, we found that both our participants and our designed program has seen several adjustments in the course of the initial several weeks. For instance, we began our pre-study planning with a focus on Russian language as the dominant language for the exchange, and quickly learned that it was less than optimal for our Uzbek partners, as they already spoke Russian as one of their native languages and saw no benefit from a project conducted in Russian, compared to having that collaboration be in English, the language of their academic pursuit.

Likewise, we began planning our VIE by introducing to our virtual classroom in Canvas approximately 12 graduate students in Uzbekistan and seven students of Russian language in the U.S., whereas by the conclusion of the study our finishing teams counted approximately 23 active undergraduate students (studying translation) from Uzbekistan and 10 freshmen (who did not study Russian language), students of the "Sports and Cold War" course. Clearly, with such adjustments our project goals saw a course correction as well. It turned out that the graduate students in Uzbekistan found little value in the project, seeing nearly no immediate gains either toward their academic or professional careers, and seeing a project as an interference with their exams. The undergraduate students, however, found the exercise appealing and showed up in high spirits, wearing formal attire and treating a project rather seriously. Often, they asked formal questions about the structure or the university, accessibility to buildings, hours of operation, etc., as though interviewing a potential future business partner.

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Evolving Goals for the Pilot VIE

- Design a co-curricular activity to allow students a meaningful cross-cultural learning experience with native speakers (NS) representing a (new) culture of Uzbekistan, as a nation-state from the region of interest in the course – the former Soviet Union.
- Learn about examples of cultural practices clearly re-enacting established societal gender roles, especially as they pertain to sports, education, and politics.
- Test a new course-model where some form of virtual international collaboration is evaluated as required course component for intercultural competence.
- Evaluate effectiveness of a new style of international collaboration for potential use as high-impact learning practice to teach intercultural competence.
- Design a collaboration based on shared and openly accessible content (audit select MOOC with easily accessible content for a restricted Internet availability that 2nd and 3rd world countries can participate in).
- Implement VIE to create a forum for concurrent discussion and community-based learning.

Progression of VIE

Students who participated in the pilot VIE in the U.S. were offered extra credit for this course work, as the time difference (12 hours) required late-night gathering times. Thus, the American students were essentially select volunteers from two initially identified classes: Russian language (second-year) and freshmen in the "Sports and Cold War" course. From the reports of our partner team leaders, we know that our Uzbek peer collaborators were initially a small group of graduate students who were, similarly to the adaptations made on the U.S. side, switched to a more fitting peer-level of undergraduate students pursuing degrees in translation studies.

In the first two weeks students of both teams were tasked with (a) completing a pre-VIE survey, asking for brief demographic information as well as their self-identified perceptions about intercultural competency and interest in learning about other cultures; (b) registering into a shared virtual classroom on Canvas by adding a personal photo and a brief post; and (c) registering into a selected MOOC (Successful Presentation Skills). Uzbek student's profiles appeared all at once in Canvas but were limited to their email addresses and, in some cases, photos with welcoming short posts. American students took more than a week to log into Canvas, complete their profiles with photos (in the majority of cases) and post their "required" digital introduction via VoiceThread. Implementation of recorded and personalized posts has been found to help create a sense of community (Kirby & Hulan, 2016; Koricich, 2013) and belonging, fostering stronger engagement and improved retention in online learning environments (Delmas, 2017; Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

Notably, in these first few weeks of introductory technology-assisted connection between the two teams – let's call it "docking" to borrow a term from space-flight nomenclature – our participants presented distinct forms of completing the task. While U.S. students posted a brief biographical welcome note with an invitation to collaborate that ranged from a post in a shared discussion room to VoiceThread complete with a video clip, the Uzbek students created no such audio/video introduction notes, even though everyone was asked to complete this part of the project by creating a short biographic file. Instead, a shared class picture was offered by the Uzbek participants (graduate students at that point) with the project leader in Uzbekistan, which instantly created a sense of trust and humanized the prospect of collaboration for American students. It took some U.S. students more than two weeks to complete these first three introductory tasks. Community-based discussions using Zoom and Skype followed at week three, when we were finally able to precisely determine the time of our live meetings (there was a time change that happened

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asynchronously for the collaborators: i.e. clocks were set back for daylight savings in the U.S. only, not in Uzbekistan). These always were conducted in the presence of the instructors on both sides.

We kept to a schedule of meeting once per week, although in week three and four we doubled up on our connection efforts, having short "test" meetings with very brief interactions. In weeks five through eight, students initiated a student-led discussion forum using alternative technologies. Our shared collaborative space expanded to cell phones on the U.S. side, as some of our students were involved in collegiate athletic competition or otherwise indisposed to be present in person for a late-night collaborative session on campus. This was a remarkable shift in our interactions, as it allowed individual students to showcase their hobby, favourite holidays, athletic commitment or learning environment, instantly causing a visible spike in interest from our Uzbek peers. For instance, one American student calling into our Zoom conference on a cell phone ended up giving a walking tour of a lab in which the student was conducting experiments and preparing for the next class at 11 p.m. at night, which both surprised and deeply impressed our Uzbek partners as their University does not have as long operating hours as do American institutions.

As the number of adaptive technological solutions at hand increased for the U.S. students, it remained unchanged in Uzbekistan: Uzbek students would always meet in specially designated conference rooms featuring high-quality audio and video capabilities. No community video or audio interactions were conducted on any alternative technology or in any alternative places, other than the university. U.S. participants, on the other hand, maintained a solid 5-6 people showing up in our designated classroom in the residential hall, and at least 3-5 people called in directly into our Zoom conference call using their cell phones, personal computers and tablets. With this natural flexibility, our Uzbek partners would witness American students in their element in real time: walking to a sports practice, studying, travelling, being sick in their dorm room, etc. This created an added element of trust and authenticity that has contributed to the initiation of an unexpected, student-suggested and cohort-wide Uzbek-American WhatsApp chat. Every single participant was added to the chat, including instructors, thereby effectively establishing an additional forum for confirming call times, sharing personal experiences, contributing spontaneous reflections, and asking follow-up questions about their respective cultures and learning practices.

It is important to observe that WhatsApp was suggested by one of our Uzbek participants, and represented a cell phone technology with significantly greater range of accessibility, as it requires minimal access to Wi-Fi to pull data and keep everyone in the loop. American participants quickly caught up with the application and immediately began communicating with the Uzbek team. Initially the WhatsApp addition was adopted as a way to prevent misalignments in Zoom calls, and it quickly evolved into a supplemental interactive space. Conspicuously, American students reported in their post-VIE reflections that their awareness of the instructor-monitoring in all of these interactions, especially cell-phone imitating text messaging of WhatsApp, made them feel too monitored and less allowed to be their own "adults" in this exchange:

> *"I also feel that it could have been more beneficial if we had each been paired up with a student to talk to individually and learn more about their culture from their perspective. While we could have attempted to do that in our group chat that we had created with the students, it still felt a little difficult and monitored as their teacher was also in our chat." (Student A1)*
>
> *"It was also very awkward at times because it clearly felt like the meeting was being watched over and controlled behind the scenes on their side." (Student A2)*
>
> *"Another suggestion would be […] to assign each student another student so you can communicate on more of a personal level." (Student A3)*

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> *"However, I would make a few changes. […] I would begin the program with teacher involvement, but as time went on I would leave it more in the hands of the students. This is because we seemed to open up and talk more when we were in the absence of any teachers or adults." (Student A4)*

Current research suggests that WhatsApp is among the top selections for the ease of operation and video and photo sharing among the Web 2.0 tools used in educational settings (Barhoumi, 2017; Gillingham & Topper, 1999; Lai, Khaddage, & Knezek, 2013, etc.). As in the case with several researched instances of applying of WhatsApp in a learning setting, students value an unstructured, informal and immediately gratifying environment that this tool affords, and as a result create a collaborative explore personal interests in a more private setting (Lai et al., 2013).

Following Avci and Adiguzel (2017), using a messaging tool such as WhatsApp, specifically, in an informal setting, allows participants to practice English (for those with ESL focus) "in an authentic setting" and interact with informal TL, which further facilitates language learning, improves participants' communication skills, and expands the functional vocabulary, in addition to reported "positive effects on their performance and the quality of their work" (p.49).

In what follows, an assessment of the process will be followed by an examination of potentialities of VIE in the future of online and traditional education, especially as they unfold during a dialogue-driven community learning exercise, allowing for a practical intercultural study, and revealing intricate nuances about the target cultures and educational practices in the present moment.

Comparative Evaluation of a Pilot VIE with Uzbekistan: intercultural perspective

At the conclusion of the pilot VIE, the reflections collected from the American students demonstrated a convergence along the lines of appreciation for a different culture; reported introspection and re-evaluation of own culture; a sense of privileged access to education and other resources; as well as increased compassion for representatives of what could be labelled as the *other*.

We discovered that American students were mostly curious about this less-known country and the cultural practices of its people, while Uzbek students were reported (by U.S. participants) to have already known "a lot" about America.

Uzbek peers confirmed that our collaborative interaction project was a matter of great importance at their university, which allowed them special access to privileged spaces of improved Internet connectivity (conference rooms), and online learning tools required by the VIE pilot project (MOOC, Canvas, VoiceThread, and Zoom). These reports have been confirmed by participating researchers and instructors as well as the online learning conferences where the initial findings from this pilot project have been presented (E-Learn 2017, International Conference on the Development and Assessment of Intercultural Competence, 2018).

Another significant self-reported distinction in utilization of the VIE as an online learning tool is a category of value ascribed to the project and its planned utilization by the students in the future. Thus, Uzbek students inquired about application processes in American higher educational institutions, earning potentials and career opportunities, affirming observations proposed by Heller and Duchéne (2012) already discussed earlier in this paper as shifting the "use value" of the acquired language to "exchange value", related by Kramsch (2016). While American participants had no exchange value to request from the Uzbek students, the latter group expressly vocalized their overt interest in obtaining practical information so as to help advance their individual academic and collective professional progress.

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Notably, in the process of this pilot VIE, we inevitably discovered how far apart our understandings of the technological tools at hand might be. Between instructors guiding the exchange, our language of pedagogical application of selected tools varied dramatically, reflecting respective needs of our students (intercultural competence for U.S. students and a project connecting students to their possible future careers for the Uzbek students). Our Uzbek colleagues treated the entire collaboration very seriously, allowing students to skip a class in some instances, and featuring the entire cohort in formal attire and connecting from rather formal settings (conference rooms). By contrast, American students wore the most informal of clothes, both due to the late hour of the evening in which the communal discussions took place, and the significantly less-formal nature of the project in the U.S. Our inability to connect in the first two instances nearly triggered a cascade of administrative interventions on the Uzbek side and merely a few reports of frustration on the part of the U.S. students. In a few cases, the American participants initiated a teleconference without the presence of the instructor; while Uzbek students have always followed a more rigid formal protocol of either being connected and introduced by the lead instructor or the assigned graduate assistant.

These distinctions, however minor, reflect on inherent transference of established institutional culture onto virtual educational projects and pedagogical tools. As our pilot VIE has demonstrated, even an introduction to the campus environment of our Uzbek partners consisted of transferring a carefully packaged and impressive video-presentation of the Davlat Jahon Tillari University. By contrast, American students literally "walked" the Uzbek peers into their rooms, labs, corridors, lounge spaces, etc., by carrying their camera-containing device around and narrating the visible surroundings. It is reasonable to conclude that the same cultural norms and behavioural patterns that govern the institutional process in Uzbekistan have been applied to the way our Uzbek partners have implemented available technology during the VIE.

In a larger sense, American participants reflected on observable distinctions on what could be termed as "universalized" technological tools and practices in education. Namely, basic access to the Internet and Uzbek students' ability to engage in collaboration with American students turned out to depend heavily on the resources offered by their university. The very act of connecting to these students online required substantial preparation, support of the university's top leadership, and special "priority" status of the project. Uzbek University is not open 24 hours, seven days a week.

In American universities students often are on-campus residents with full access to various services including uninterrupted internet connectivity, research support systems, and on-demand access to learning tools. Hence, too often, educators and students alike take online tools for granted, developing a false perception of their universality as a basic commodity of modern life. In our VIE we quickly discovered that what we believed to be a "basic commodity" (reliable Internet connection) required serious planning and orchestration to access. Unlike U.S. student participants who have full capability of accessing shared course content and posting large video and audio files into online collaborative commons of Canvas, Uzbek students could access either the shared MOOC content or the American partners during strictly set times in different study/conference rooms, and only while on-campus during business hours of the institution, typically concluding at 6-7 p.m. Thus, one of the most profound realizations in the course of this pilot project was the understanding of how vastly different our perceptions and uses of technology were.

Poignantly, these technologies likewise have different philosophical and practical status within our respective institutions. Whereas for U.S. participants, telecommunication programs such as Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, Google Hangout, Voice/Video Recorder, and Canvas notifications are considered basic operational functions of any electronic device, these are *special* tools for privileged

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access to select few on an institution-granted basis (university conference rooms for Zoom calls, special computer access to MOOC content and other tools for Uzbek partners). Only our Uzbek researchers and instructors reported having limited cellular internet capacities outside of their university offices.

Furthermore, as other Uzbek researchers Hasanova and Shadieva (2008) point out, the very practice of educating the future ESL faculty in communicative methods belongs to the sphere of direct government involvement in design and tracking of quotas in secondary education and professional (every three years!) re-certification of the ESL teachers in the uses of communicative pedagogy and contemporary learning tools (pp.139-141). By contrast, the U.S. government has no direct involvement in developing or insuring instructional practices in individual disciplines, instead allowing the states, professional organizations and educational institutions to engage in quality-control of pedagogical practices.

Since our Uzbek student participants were students of ESL and aspiring translators and educators, they represented a population personally affected by the Uzbek government's educational practices and thus, express interests. For these students, mastering new educational tools, such as MOOCs and adjacent collaborative platforms such as Canvas and Zoom constitute a strategic learning outcome. It is reasonable to assume that these students would have had to compile reports on their learning progress at the conclusion of the VIE, although we received no confirmation of such action. This government-dictated value of the ESL in Uzbekistan, we might observe, likewise had an impact on the evolution of our VIE, whereby a language of interaction has been changed to English instead of originally proposed Russian.

Open education, therefore, does not imply a uniform use of selected technology; nor are our pedagogical takeaways the same. Rather, these online tools become imbued with specific socio-cultural, if not political, values of participating collaborators. A case in point is a standard inclusion of a gender identification question in the demographics section of the pre- and post-survey for the U.S. protocol, which was promptly requested to not be addressed in any way at the initial results reports during the above-mentioned conferences by our Uzbek partners. In other words, even though we courageously undertake these virtual international collaborations, we do not have sufficient data to review our progress in either intercultural competence (in terms of actually advancing our ability to connect, collaborate, and respectfully explore the areas of distinct differences inter-culturally) or our ability to put the online educational tools to their full potential.

Additional research is needed to survey these uniquely local(ized) practices of engaging with available online technology in an intercultural collaborative setting. A separate set of parameters is needed for a further evaluation of potential outcomes of such a collaboration, when the survey results are made known to the participants and are allowed to be processed and reflected on by the collaborating teams to advance the respective understanding of the larger landscape of the full capabilities in pedagogical application of these open online tools.

Possibly, the most valuable takeaway from this experiment was the unanimous agreement among the U.S. participants that the VIE project "opened their eyes" to the world in new ways and stirred the feelings of compassion and appreciation for a different culture. Here are some examples from the volunteered reflections at the close of the project:

> *"With the conclusion of the study with the Uzbeks I can say that I have changed as a person. I am more open minded with different cultures, I am eager to learn about other's perspectives on issues, and I am more confident in my presentation skills. I am waiting for my next opportunity to take part in something like this again." (Student A4)*

> *"My perception of myself and my culture has definitely changed throughout this experience. This international exchange was very eye opening to me […] My interactions with the Uzbekistan students across the globe certainly encouraged me to be more compassionate and more mindful as well as wanting to explore other cultures and experience other parts of the world. This experience makes me very eager to travel and experience and see things that I do not see on a daily basis. I would certainly suggest that instructors continue exploring this style of exchange in the classrooms." (Student A2)*
>
> *"I found the experience to be quite eye opening to another part of the world. We learned a lot about them and their culture. I had no clue about where Uzbekistan was, or what it was like to live there. This fuelled some curiosity to learn more about Uzbekistan, which may have never happened without this course we took as a class." (Student A3)*
>
> *"The virtual exchange with the class in Uzbekistan was my first experience interacting with a group of students in another country. Since I had never experienced anything like it before, I found it very interesting. I am also interested in studying abroad at some point in the future to explore other cultures so it was a small glimpse into what it may be like to interact with other students while I am abroad." (Student A5)*
>
> *"Trying to get a hold of them and all of these hurdles has made me more mindful! I realized during this time that we are way more privileged than these students and it takes a great effort for them to receive an education. This enriched my academic experience because it opened my eyes to other students around the world and their experiences." (Student A6)*

Such reports allow us to anticipate the possibility for a more systematic application of VIEs in pedagogy. Jarring, surprising, eye-opening – these moments of crossing paths with an entirely different symbolic system of social meanings, political and cultural canons, beliefs and practices call on a student's ability to re-evaluate their own experience. It is disruptive learning in action, a practice of nonjudgment co-occurring with involvement and curiosity representing learning with an "open mind." Having been exposed to disruption in perception of their own system of meanings and values, students eventually recognize how far this has stretched their imagination. Thus disruptive learning opportunities, such as our pilot VIE, allow our students to personally create more equitable, inclusive and diverse classrooms with greater value and practical applicability for all. These VIEs allow us to introduce much-needed variety in teaching cultural context and current cultural practices, replacing PowerPoints with real people and authentic, lasting experiences.

It is noteworthy that no reports were received from the Uzbek side of the collaboration, so at this point is it impossible to evaluate their participation in the pilot other than our initial quantitative data. Nonetheless, reports from American students indicate the impact of the project supervisors on the scope of themes to cover and "acceptable" language of interaction. These reports – however minimal and possibly impacted by our restraints – represent moments of disruptive learning in action.

One such example is the very fact that the project supervisors of the Uzbek side specifically requested to "take off" potentially controversial topics of discussion from our planned interview questions for the gender roles portion of the cultural exchange. Thus, no women athletes could be discussed, or women politicians. Politics and gender politics were among several topics outlined as "off limits" in our preparatory conversations with the Uzbekistan teaching staff. We were, however, allowed to discuss cooking culture and the distribution of gender roles in this sphere of human interaction and cultural practices, thus allowing our students to learn about Uzbek men proudly cooking in their kitchens. Through these discussion topic "adjustments," American students

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reported discovering how tightly regulated and controlled their Uzbek collaborators were, and how heavily involved their University was in our seemingly trivial class project.

Similarly, we, the American educators supervising the pilot VIE, in our preparation to report on our project and the first findings at a joint conference talk, learned more about the cultural practices and the intersections of education and politics when our collaborators and co-presenters asked us to respectfully remove a demographics slide from our deck. The slide was intended as a routine context marker for our participants reporting on their self-assessment of belonging to a particular gender, alternative gender identification or lack of it. Our colleagues remarked that there were "no alternative genders in Uzbekistan" therefore the slide was inappropriate. We obediently removed the slide, fearing a disruption of our conference talk or later potential negative consequences to possible future projects.

These brief moments of clashes between cultures, especially as they pertain to the intersection between social and cultural practices, political influences and control, and their inevitable technological disruption represent moments of profound learning for all sides involved. These likewise create windows of opportunities for new perspectives, shifts in attitudes and practices that sometimes may arrive too early, or too late, or just in time for the current socio-cultural shaping of the interactions between the future global collaborators, such as our students on both sides.

A Possibility for Disruptive Learning Advantage

In the process of this collaboration, we have learned that there is a considerable difference in our understanding and application of the "same" learning technologies we put forth as agreed upon pedagogical tools for the project. As a result of a specific attributed value (national prestige/international visibility, etc.), some of our progress has been interrupted (without proper permissions and arrangements on the Uzbek side no online discussion could take place), some expressly controlled (discussion of politically and culturally sensitive topics has been kept off-limits), and some greatly accelerated (U.S. students' profound spontaneous introspection). It is with appreciation for a specific cultural colouring of this experience that student participants, researchers and instructors reflected on the shared experiences and collected our findings presented here.

Thus, we propose that VIE represents an inherently daring enterprise with high value and long-term pay-off capacity. Specifically, regardless of the difficulties involved in the execution of a collaborative international project, VIE can serve as a tool of disruptive learning, simultaneously revealing a living culture and allowing us access to experiential educational interactions with its bearers. It is similar to study abroad but does not carry the same travel requirements and financial burdens, allowing greater accessibility to learners at scale. It is equally effective for learners in traditional classrooms as it is for online and hybrid class participants.

The inherent "danger" of such an interaction lies primarily in discovering the powerful presence of similarities in the sea of cultural differences between the participants. It is the same "danger" that bares a human soul in a live theatre and makes us weep with the characters whose stories unfold before our eyes (TedEx, Rudnick, 2018). Recent studies on live theatrical productions have indicated that the heartbeats of the audience synchronize with those of the actors in certain dramatic scenes, suggesting that the earliest hypothesis identifying "mirror neurons" in humans as our innate ability to feel pain, joy, sadness, elation and compassion indeed is physiologically real. Wouldn't this suggest that engaging in virtual international community building and discussion-based learning online could help us harness the power of our capabilities to grow a more compassionate, sensitive, alert, and caring heart?

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Admittedly, a certain form of cognitive dissonance occurs on both sides of the participating groups related to either the set-up of the interaction or its content. This allows for an effective and powerful cultural learning that has profound and lasting effects on the learners, and specifically an effect of increasing their interest, appreciation, and compassion for the *others* and for themselves. It is out contention that, indeed, VIEs can have such an effect in the form of thoughtfully designed, meaningful learning experiences of high-impact and deep value for the human heart. Similar aspirations for the future of education have been expressed by researchers in contemplative neuroscience (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). Further evidence of education improving social interactions has been advanced by Pert and Chopra (1997), who in her identification of the "molecules of emotion" proved that emotional intelligence has a seat (or, rather, several) in the physical body and can be developed to further nourish happy human beings who play a pronounced role in evolution of peaceful human societies.

Concluding Hypothesis

- As a result of incorporating VIEs in their regular courses, instructors gain practical skills of facilitating an open dialogue, cross-cultural exploration, and intercultural communication to hold a space for more inclusive and diverse, yet culturally contextualized FL instruction;
- As a result of participating in a VIE, students experience increased interest in learning of a foreign language and more about a foreign culture;
- VIEs have the potential to both reveal the cultural identities of the regions studied in their current geo-political and artistic contexts, and to quite possibly become a signature pedagogical tool of global education as part of foundational learning experience on intercultural competence offered in liberal arts colleges.

A certain caution should be exercised in engagements such as VIE, where another culture is to be connected with and communicatively explored in a respectful way, without overbearing analysis or reductionist oversimplification. In such a case, a completion of a VIE can prepare the ground for truly remarkable intercultural competence that educates our students in an experiential and meaningful way; as well as affirm and nourish respective partners, indicating areas of possible growth and constructive future collaborations.

It is likewise our contention that however distinct our practices in using technology and online learning tools in our pedagogical arsenal might be, the very fact of opening up the channel of communication furthers the project of appreciation of the *other*, humanization of the people living within such a culture, and profound re-evaluation of the self within one's own living culture. As such, VIE represents a prodigious opportunity to learn experientially about people living in circumstances other than our own and developing a sense of appreciation, respect and compassion. It is in these opportunities that we can harness the possibility of designing the high-impact learning practices that allow for an experiential interaction with diversity and equity in real time, and of which the students write "This exchange resonated with me as a learner and a person" (Student A6) and "I can say that I have changed as a person" (Student A7).

Open international live collaborations such as VIEs can prove formative in transitioning the future generations of the global citizens from fear, "apprehension," and distrust (commonly reported on our pre-VIE surveys) to appreciation, respect, and compassion necessary to sustain future generations in peaceful and creative global productivity.

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Concluding Remarks

Investing in this intersection proves particularly valuable when viewed as a means of assimilating a shared mission in today's liberal arts colleges where we quest for successful community-building, cultural sensitivity, appreciation of diversity, and practice of equity, all fused with a rigorous academic learning process. We term all of the above as "inclusive excellence" and demand its execution by every member of the faculty. Creating a meaningful and actionable learning exercise that dovetails with the course goals as well as institutional vision is a win-win and affords a unique chance to design a culturally enriching exercise for the students that is simultaneously a high-impact learning experience adding significant value to the student learning process, retention and graduation rates, and ensuing success of a college/course graduate. Most notably, however, a VIE represents a deeply human, adaptive and clearly disruptive learning experience that focuses on learning with an open mind, practicing compassion and self-reflection — all tremendously valuable in an age in which our students are increasingly anxious and depressed.

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Naomi Wahls
University of Colorado Denver and Boulder, United States
EdD Candidate, University of Colorado Denver
PhD Candidate Open Universiteit, Netherlands
UNESCO Mentor to Uzbekistan - Open Education for a Better World
naomi.wahls@ucdenver.edu

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Mukaddas Ogay
O'zbeiston Davlat Jahon Tillari Universiteti, Uzbekistan: ogaymukaddas@gmail.com

Alisher Abidjanov
Hubert H Humphrey Fellow 2017-18
Peabody, Vanderbilt University
O'zbeiston Davlat Jahon Tillari Universiteti, Uzbekistan: aabidjanov@gmail.com

Dr. Galina Siergiejczyk
University of Colorado Boulder, United States
siarheic@colorado.edu
UNESCO Mentor to Uzbekistan - Open Education for a Better World

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