

Virtual Classroom Experiences for Second Language Learning and Cultural Exchange

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This article is about the college experience and the design and implementation for a first-time virtual classroom linking non-native speakers of French in the U.S. with native speakers of French in France. Virtual exchange programs have begun to appear over the past 25 years as technology has made such initiatives possible. The virtual classroom described here was designed to address second language skills and intercultural competencies including non-verbal communication skills, cultural knowledge, and to encourage personal engagement. This article offers an account of how such a course between two universities became a reality and reviews the methodological steps adopted and the challenges involved in creating the program. It also offers recommendations for future virtual classrooms involved in university-wide virtual exchange initiatives.

Keywords: virtual exchange, intercultural competencies, cultural perspectives and knowledge, global learning, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Virtual exchange or telecollaboration programs in second language and culture with partner classes in distant locations in higher education began more than 25 years ago (Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Eck et al., 1995). Initially, only a few universities were involved. But improvements in technology since the early 2010s have led to the spread of these programs, and research has shown that they contribute greatly to improving students' verbal and non-verbal communication skills through structured interactions. Numerous universities have sought to develop intercultural and global competencies through virtual exchange programs (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; O'Dowd & O'Rourke 2019; Ward, 2016). These programs are aligned with different assessment tools such as the framework of the AAC&U (Bennett, 2008) or those tools of Deardorff (2006) and SUNY (2013) that measure students' intercultural and international skills (Deardorff, 2009; Welikala & Watkins, 2008). According to Jackson (2011), virtual exchange programs also contribute to a growing awareness of other cultures as well as students' own culture. As students

review and learn about other cultures and are encouraged to reflect on the perspectives of others, they begin to question their views about their own culture (Shah & Young, 2009).

At St. John's University (SJU), international learning initiatives have been a priority since the 1990s. SJU has a presence in several parts of the world through partnerships, collaborations, and campuses that promote students' intercultural and international skills. According to the university's 2019 report *Open Doors* (Institute of International Education, 2019), 40% of the undergraduate students of SJU studied abroad that year, consistent with the recent several years. This number could have been higher but for one challenge: even though scholarships were allocated to some students, students with lesser means and financial support could not benefit from the opportunity the university offered them through study abroad programs. In the Fall of 2018, SJU started investing in virtual exchange initiatives partly in response to the need for equity and inclusion and partly in recognition of the need to embed global learning into the existing curriculum (American Council on Education, 2005). The goal was to give students who could not participate in study abroad programs access to intercultural global experiences through technology, enabling them to connect online with students from other institutions to have peer-to-peer interactions. It was expected that through such programs, students would have an opportunity to share ideas and develop personal relationships and to increase their international understanding and knowledge.

The first step in developing a virtual exchange program at SJU was to support the training of five administrators and faculty members and two instructional designers from the university at the Global Learning Exchange (GLE) program of De Paul University (<https://resources.depaul.edu/teachingcommons/programs/globallearning/Pages/default.aspx>). The second step was to implement these initiatives in the classroom. As one of the faculty members with administrative responsibilities, I had the opportunity to carry out this project in the Spring and Summer of 2019 and to launch the course in the Fall of 2019 as a level-3 French language and culture class under the name Global Online Learning Exchange (GOLE).

This article offers an account of the experience of implementing a virtual exchange collaboration between undergraduate students studying French and undergraduate students studying English. It outlines the challenges that were encountered and the methodology that was used and summarizes the experiences of the students who were involved in it. It reviews evidence of student successes and offers recommendations for future virtual collaborations.

DESIGN OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

Developing a virtual exchange course at SJU required finding a partner at a French-speaking institution who would be interested in collaborating in such a project. It also required creating the conditions to connect the two classrooms and to develop the outline of the course, including activities and assignments. Once the course started, other challenges had to be faced such as student communication issues, calendar conflicts, and unexpected social and political events that interfered with the academic work calendar.

CONNECTING TWO CLASSROOMS

Early in the Spring semester of 2019, the author actively searched for a partner in France. Finding another faculty member from a French-speaking university who was interested in collaborating and whose course objectives and teaching calendar were compatible with the ones taught with the author was one of the most challenging parts of the project. SJU has strong ties with France because it has a Paris site, but we were looking for a smaller city with some connections with U.S. history. Several possibilities were

considered, but the city of Nantes, located on the other side of the Atlantic from New York, seemed an ideal site for our initiative as it is a vibrant, middle-sized city with an excellent university. It also has a history closely connected with the U.S. through the emigration of the Breton population and its history with the “Atlantic Triangular Slave Trade”. The “Atlantic Triangular Slave Trade” is best known as the transatlantic slave trade that operated from the late sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries, carrying slaves, cash crops, and manufactured goods between West Africa, the Caribbean colonies, and the European colonial powers. Nantes was one of the European cities involved in the trade.

In the late Spring of 2019, the collaboration started with on-site work, online meetings and course preparation. The most important outcome of the in-person meetings in Nantes and the discussions that followed during the summer and the Fall of 2019 via Skype was developing the necessary trust (Holton, 2001).

Although most of the work was achieved through online meetings, the early face-to-face contact allowed the author to develop a more personal relationship and comprehend the university context. This, in turn, enabled the instructor to better coordinate the exchanges and course activities and to gain a better understanding of the international partner’s teaching approach.

After reviewing both course objectives, desired outcomes, and discussing the needs of students at both universities, both instructors agreed to use a combination of synchronous and asynchronous sessions for a period of 8 weeks. The synchronous sessions served to connect the two classes as a whole at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The asynchronous sessions were introduced to allow students to work in dyads. In these asynchronous sessions, each student spoke live in one-hour sessions, half in French and half in English, for a total of four to six hours during the semester. The overall project offered students an opportunity to participate in real-life experiences at each meeting through well-structured activities that aimed to create a sense of community between the French and American students.

Course planning. After finding a colleague, who was interested in collaborating in such a project, the next important challenge was aligning the learning outcomes with the activities and assignments that the instructors had planned for their respective courses. Once the parallel outcomes and common themes and activities were finalized, it was necessary to identify the assignments and types of assessments to present to the students along with the deadlines for each assignment. Syllabi delivered at the beginning of each semester in the U.S. offer more details as to the specifics of the course content and expectations of students than syllabi at European institutions. Because of the different academic calendars, both instructors decided to use different assignments and assessments and to set different deadlines in each class. French students start their semester two to three weeks later in the Fall than students in the U.S. This calendar difference was an opportunity for me to spend more time with the SJU students to prepare them with the necessary language skills to engage in conversations with their French linguistic partners. The U.S. students were only in their third semester of a French language class, so they required a longer preparation and more structured supervision.

Structured activities. During the planning of the course, it became clear that a neutral, common online platform is needed to store the project’s goals, syllabi, course content, collaboration terms, schedule of tasks for each week, and some of the students’ artefacts. With the assistance of the team in St. John’s Office of Online Learning and Services, a Google website was presented as the most appropriate platform to store course information and students’ work. The syllabus, the structure of the French course, and the six virtual meetings over the eight-week period were all posted on the website as captured in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Course Website



At this point, with the themes, the partner, the technologies, and some activities in mind, it was time to identify the competencies and goals the project was going to prioritize. The goals were to: a) improve students' communicative skills in the second language through planned interactions their linguistic partner; b) enable students to collaborate with their linguistic partner to achieve a common goal and get each other's perspectives on each topic in a real-world context; and c) exchange information with their linguistic partner in their target language and establish common points and differences between the two cultures on the specific topic. The next step was to consider and define the contents to be studied. With the videos as the final output, oral language production remained a priority. For that, alignment of the goals, contents, and assessment criteria was necessary. For the preparation of the contents, it was important to: a) identify the specific vocabulary on the related theme for every communication session; b) focus on specific grammatical structures such as conditional and subjunctive; c) include communicative, interactive, and intercultural themes; and d) add digital competency as they were using new platforms on the website. The assessment criteria were the following for students to: a) take initiative to reach out, communicate and meet; b) actively participate in all activities; c) contribute to achieve the project goals; d) use communicative strategies to understand others and to be understood by others in French; and e) use critical thinking to reflect and report back on "new perspectives and theme discoveries" during the specific theme discussions.

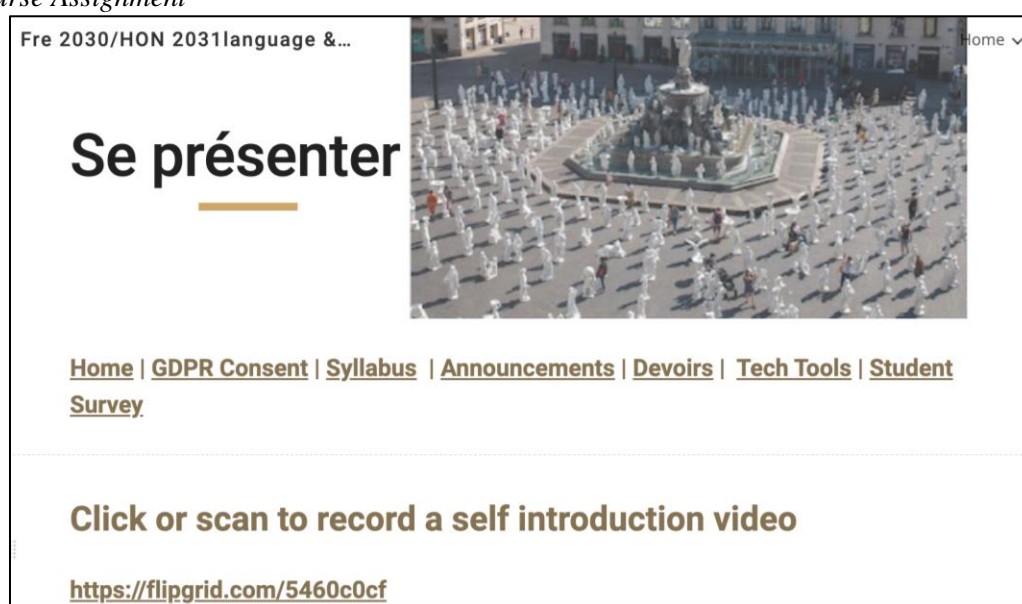
There are a large number of pedagogical and methodological tools for virtual classrooms in second language and culture (Levy, 2009; Maloney, 2019; O'Dowd 2015;), so anyone interested to create such a pedagogical experience can find the most appropriate or suitable tool. Among the different methodologies and tools, Murphy's (2004) theoretical framework of virtual exchange seemed the most appropriate. It made the most sense because it enables students to move from simple interaction to real collaboration. This methodology also leads students to the production of a common artefact. Murphy postulates six steps, called processes, that help to prepare students to move gradually into action: (a) social presence, (b) articulating individual perspectives, (c) accommodating or reflecting on the perspectives of others, (d) co-constructing shared perspectives and meanings, (e) building shared goals and purposes, and (f) producing shared artefacts. As Murphy writes according to Williams et al., (2015) "in order for the highest level of collaboration processes to occur within OAD (online asynchronous discussion) there must be explicit strategies or techniques aimed at promoting these processes" (pp. 47-48). Therefore, with collaboration and communication among students, success within developing interlinguistic connections is easily achieved.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROCESSES

The first process, social presence, is very important as this interaction lays the foundation for further collaboration. To initiate the first interactions, two types of activities were introduced to the students (Garrison, 2000). The first one was the synchronous class session that served as an ice-breaker activity for both classes and gave the students the opportunity to view each other as real people. Every one of the U.S. students came to the synchronous meeting prepared to give a one-minute presentation about who they were and brought a favorite object and told what it meant to them in French.

The second asynchronous activity of the social presence process involved requiring every student to submit on Flipgrid an individual 3-minute presentation and to post it on the Google website as seen below in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Course Assignment



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Click or scan to record a self introduction video

<https://flipgrid.com/5460c0cf>

This served as a more personal and in-depth introduction in which students spoke about their studies and their hobbies. The U.S. students presented in French, which required preparation in advance that began with pronunciation drills, sentence structure review, and learning the appropriate vocabulary. Students started this assignment in class, but continued at St. John's Global Language and Culture Center. In preparation for every assignment, SJU students had submitted their presentations in French in class and on the website. They also had to practice their oral skills at St. John's Global Language and Culture Center (GLCC), an academic support center serving students registered for classes in the Department of Languages and Literatures, the Institute of Asian Studies, the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, and the Language Connection, as well as any student interested in furthering his or her knowledge of a language. Students can start practicing one or several of the languages currently offered at St. John's University in the Center. Through immersion and interaction and with the help of trained language peers, students build on the language skills acquired in the classroom in a convivial and pressure-free atmosphere. These presentation activities created a form of belonging in the group and a sense of engagement and curiosity about each other. At the

same time, this activity enabled both instructors to match the students in dyads based on their interests and profiles.

The next process focused on the articulation of individual perspectives. Students worked in asynchronous meetings in dyads, with each French student being paired with a student from the U.S. In these meetings, they shared personal perspectives and interests including questions about their everyday life, their goals after graduation, the neighborhoods they lived in, and their travel plans. This was the first of the four asynchronous meetings that enabled them to share personal information, express their feelings, opinions, and beliefs, and hear each other's articulation of individual perspectives (Murphy, 2004). Through these meetings, the U.S. students were able to understand the context in which their French peers lived and studied. They reported in writing their findings about their partners' lives, beliefs, and perspectives in French.

The third process, reflecting on the perspectives of others (Murphy, 2004), was the focus of the second, third, and fourth asynchronous meetings. Students from both classrooms started the real collaboration on each topic that would lead to a final artefact. Each time, the students focused on different topics ranging from the local and national politics of Nantes and France, to local migration issues, to local food products, practices, and social issues widely covered in France such as the "green jackets" (social and political movement). Readings from *Le Monde* and various local Nantes websites were the starting points for their research. The U.S. students were also introduced to the specific topic-related vocabulary so they could use it during the discussions. The perspectives they discussed were reported back to class orally and in writing in French. By the time these meetings occurred, the U.S. students had enough information on the others' perspectives on personal and academic topics based on the common discussions. The written work was the artefact they had to present at the last synchronous class meeting (Murphy, 2004).

During the second and final virtual synchronous class meeting, all students were supposed to present the artefacts they had gathered during their asynchronous meetings to both classes. Even though this session was prepared, and the dates were included in the syllabus, the strikes in France had started in mid-November 2019 and because of student mobilization, courses in French universities were canceled.

For their assessments, the U.S. students were required to submit as an output their recorded audio or video exchanges on Google Drive. They used Skype to communicate and record the communications as well as other means of asynchronous communication such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, or Google chat. Before every virtual exchange, the SJU students practiced in class and also with the tutors from the GLCC to make sure they were ready. All along, students were getting feedback about the Skype interviews on their pronunciation, intonation, engaging with their partners' questions, learning to ask for clarifications on the perspectives of others and including sufficient information on the specific theme they were working on.

CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

During this first experience with a virtual exchange class, several challenges had to be addressed in order to strengthen the U.S. students' French language skills, cultural competences and knowledge, and engagement. These challenges were related to different factors such as technology, coordination of assignment deadlines and communication, logistics, course content issues and, most importantly, the unpredictable political events that led to the cancelation of classes at the end of the semester in France. Some of these challenges with recommendations for future virtual exchange collaborations and for this class in subsequent semesters are presented below.

TECHNOLOGY CHALLENGES

Both universities had excellent internet connectivity and there were no issues in organizing the synchronous class meetings for both classes together. However, some of the American students had problems when they tried to connect from home rather than from campus to talk to their linguistic partners. The same was true for the French students, who had challenges with a reliable internet connection over the weekend.

Another issue with technology was the choice of platforms for the synchronous connection of the two classes. Each university relied on different platforms for this type of communication. After several discussions and meetings with the IT teams from both sides, we agreed to use the platform of the French university called Lifesize. That meant coordinating with the IT teams from both universities and planning several trials between the faculty members to ensure better coordination to address any problems.

CALENDAR CHALLENGES

The two universities followed different academic calendars, with SJU starting and ending 3 weeks earlier, that led us to adopt different deadlines for the assignments. This adjustment created problems with the students' coordination among themselves and their lack of urgency to meet. The students complained that they would not hear back from their partners or that it would be too late to turn in the assignment, and the deadlines piled up. Multiple times we had to intervene to facilitate communication between students. The American students in the French class had more frequent assignments and deadlines over the course of the semester, while their French partners had fewer assignments during the semester and more assignments at the end. The lack of prompt response from their partners became a source of frustration. In addition, the U.S. students grappled with language misunderstandings since their language skills were at the level A2, B1. This problem is common and recognized by many researchers in online communication (Lamy & Hampel, 2007).

LOGISTIC CHALLENGES

Trying to organize the synchronous class sessions was a major challenge. Both instructors had to coordinate meetings in light of a 6-hour time difference and different class schedules. France is 6 hours ahead of New York, and the class at SJU was meeting in the middle of the day in New York while the French class was meeting in the early afternoon. In other words, there was no overlap of the class times. The U.S. students were notified at the beginning of the semester and the information was included on the syllabus that the two synchronous meetings were to take place at 7:30am, which would coincide with the class hours of the French students. Changing the students' schedule twice during the semester, even though it was announced ahead of time, was challenging since many of the students juggled work and classes at the same time. On two occasions, it was necessary to request special permission from two of the colleagues for students who attended another class scheduled at 7:30am.

UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES

The French course level 3 included multiple themes during the semester for every single student, and the activities and assignments tailored for them varied in the collaboration model that was adopted (Murphy, 2004). That became overwhelming for the students, as they did not have enough time to go in depth with every theme, learn from and reflect on the perspectives of the cultures of others, and produce a shared artefact at the end. The "shared" artefact was produced as a result of their discussions, but it was not the same one for both groups of students.

The most important challenge was not being able to complete the last two steps of Murphy's (2004) collaboration model due to the student riots in France and the closure of the French universities. When the universities re-opened, our semester in the U.S. had ended. This left us without an artefact to be presented orally in the last synchronous class meeting. A back-up plan with alternative activities was put in place at the last minute. SJU students had to prepare an oral presentation about the different perspectives they learned from their French partners to our class. However, that left them without a sense of closure and unable to finish all the steps that had been planned (Murphy, 2004). This disappointing ending underscores how important flexibility is to the success of such efforts because of the many challenges involved in such programs between two distant universities that require constant adaptation to the different requirements of the class and the individual students.

LESSONS LEARNED

After this first virtual exchange teaching experience, there are several issues that would be addressed differently in subsequent virtual exchange courses. These would cover topics such as the type of assignments and deadlines, the focus on common artefacts, the assessment of student learning.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DEADLINES

The deadlines for the assignments should be carefully coordinated to coincide with both classes, so students would be faced with the same pressure to meet and submit them at the same time. This adjustment would help them to communicate with their linguistic partners in a more timely manner. It will help alleviate the communication challenges and frustrations they experienced in addition to the linguistic difficulties they had to cope with, and the faculty members would be less busy reminding the students individually about their responsibility to respond to individual requests. It will also help avoid feelings of frustration and the sense that their respective partners are not interested in their project.

COURSE CONTENT MODIFICATIONS AND EMPHASIS ON THE COMMON ARTEFACT

There should be fewer course objectives and themes to explore to give students the opportunity to dig deeper into the topics they study and discuss in class and among each other so they can better articulate their perspectives.

Ample time should be given in the last stage of the collaboration model for students to prepare the final artefact, organize it, and submit it in writing and orally. This last activity gives them a sense of closure, and they feel more connected as they have the common goal to work to produce something together.

STUDENT LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Even though the plan was to implement a more systematic assessment of the virtual exchange initiative, it was impossible to keep up with a step-by-step assessment in three parts (i.e., at the beginning of the course, in the middle of the course, and at the end of the course assessment; Guth & Helm, 2017). It was an overwhelming semester with lots of unknowns, most of them involving factors that were out of the control of the faculty members involved. Nevertheless, it was possible to obtain an end-of-the-semester assessment of the project by gathering students' information and reactions.

In answering the post-assessment questions, the students self-reported on whether they had achieved the French language and cultural learning objectives in the course syllabus,

what the virtual exchange approach meant for them, and how it impacted their learning. The post-assessment questions for the virtual exchange reflection paper were as follows:

Please give specific examples when answering the following questions:

- How was the virtual experience for you?
- Did it meet your expectations with the course goals?
- What have you learned about yourselves and what have you learned about the “others”?
- What have you learned from your discussions with your linguistic partners about their beliefs and personal convictions?
- What have you learned about Nantes and France?

Fourteen of the fifteen students in class responded to the virtual assessment questions, and all reported that the virtual exchange class had exceeded their expectations. Specifically, they reported that they met and exceeded their expectations for language skills and that they gained specific cultural knowledge.

The majority of the students expressed how “overwhelmed” they felt at the beginning of the class, not by the amount of work, but by the challenge they felt in reaching out and connecting to other peers from a different culture and language. Many talked about their initial “shyness”, “nervousness”, “fear”, “intimidation”, “nerve wrecking feeling”, “awkward”, and “frightening feeling”, not only about reaching out to their partners, but also about speaking in a second language. One of the students recorded that when he came in the first class and realized the expectations, he tried to change classes but ultimately remained for the semester. The students who were registered in the virtual exchange class did not know ahead of time about this project. Once they were registered, they received the information and were still able to withdraw if they wanted to. At the end of the experience, he reported being “proud” of his accomplishments in overcoming his initial reactions and staying engaged in the project. He also ended up with one of the highest grades because of the quality of his work. All other students reported that at the end of the semester they felt more confident about themselves for reaching out, initiating discussions with people from other cultures, and feeling less shy.

Another important outcome that was mentioned in the self-reflections was students’ surprise at how their culture was viewed by others. Through the virtual exchange experience, they saw themselves and their culture through the eyes of the other, which added to their cultural self-awareness and gave them new perspectives about their own cultural rules and practices. In particular, they were surprised to hear their linguistic partners’ views on guns, social politics, and the current political climate.

The students felt a great connection with their linguistic partners, and they formed connections and relationships that lasted beyond the class. Intercultural skills such as attitudes, openness, and empathy for others were equally reported as accomplishments along with the linguistic and cultural benefits from the virtual learning experience. Many students created friendships with their peers, keeping in touch and committing to meet while traveling in France. Some students were very enthusiastic, motivated, and more engaged to continue learning French.

The author had anticipated this approach would be an alternative way of international learning for those who were not able to travel, but it also became a tool to motivate some who had no intention to travel before. Students who had been apprehensive or unwilling to study abroad became more open to such an experience. For these students, their participation in the virtual exchange program became the steppingstone for studying abroad, even though this was not the original plan. Four students added French as their minor.

In the future, it will be helpful to include one or two short questions after each activity with their linguistic partners to assess the different steps and have a better idea of how efficient the activities are. These will be in addition to the final reflection. In subsequent semesters, I would like to have a common assessment plan between the two student groups from both universities and work to develop tools that can bring more quantifiable results in terms of assessment.

MOVING FORWARD BEYOND ONE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Virtual exchange initiatives can definitely contribute to the internationalization of students, faculty, and curricula in multiple ways while developing and strengthening international institutional collaborations through partnerships (Jackson, 2015). In this virtual collaborative case, first, the students benefited immensely from their experiences with their partners abroad. Second, the curricula were enhanced with immersion experiences for students with emphasis on communication skills and specific international knowledge without physical mobility and emphasis on equity for the inclusion of all. Last but not least, the faculty were immersed in international experiences working with colleagues in other parts of the world and learning from each other's teaching experiences and class practices.

It appears that a virtual exchange can contribute to the internationalization of the campus through an internal network of students, faculty, and administrators in a learning community with common international interests and aspirations. In addition, it can force faculty members to include international/intercultural competencies in their courses to meet strategic priorities and core competencies for all students. The exchange can also be the foundation for creating a data bank that produces new collaborations for MOUs and Visiting Scholars as well as for creating or strengthening existing partnerships. Among students, it can generate interest in studying abroad and in language and culture learning. Finally, a virtual exchange can lead to new collaborations among multiple stakeholders at the university level, including administrators from the Center for Teaching & Learning, the Offices of International Education and of Online Learning and Services, faculty members, and students.

Some recommendations to administrators to create successful future virtual exchange programs that can create a community of faculty members on campus who are deeply involved in international education are presented below:

- Build a stable program of rigorous faculty development and training with ongoing institutional support.
- Create virtual exchange senior fellows to support new "virtual exchange" faculty members and serve as their mentors in creating new projects.
- Gather data and upload all courses and material with outcomes and assessments that can serve as the basis for new initiatives.
- Offer faculty incentives to integrate the virtual exchange program into their courses; make virtual exchange initiatives part of the criteria for annual faculty promotion and recognition awards.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the author concluding this article, we are in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis and all university courses have moved online. The spread of the virus has had a tremendous impact on education systems around the world. In April 2020, UNESCO (2020) reported that more than 290 million young people were faced with disruptions to their education. More than ever, the virtual exchange approach is essential for students and faculty as we

rely on tools of technology to deliver knowledge. We are currently faced with a great inequality in knowledge, experience, and technology as students cope with critical financial and existential issues and as we depend more and more on technology. Peer-to-peer interactions that they create for knowledge may matter more during these times than the content we deliver, and virtual exchange can create meaningful relationships for knowledge. With the increase of virtual exchange programs, students not only gain the sense of being beyond their lifestyle, but also develop a sense of cultural competence that enhances their academic and social lives toward their future.

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