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Faculty Perceptions of Building Collaborative Teaching Capacities within a Transnational Virtual Exchange: A Collaborative Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

The 2019/2020 academic year brought historic opportunities for faculty to manage virtual exchanges (O'Dowd, 2021), yet limited research exists on how teachers develop their capacity within these programs. As educators collaborating on a transnational virtual exchange, we aim to investigate the process that teachers go through as they co-develop and collaborate in a transnational virtual exchange from our experiences and perceptions. We ask: To what extent do previous lived experiences mediate the process of teacher capacity building in a transnational virtual, collaborative exchange? This collaborative qualitative autoethnography case study explores our experiences as four instructors from the United States and Hong Kong, reflecting our experiences as they relate to teacher capacity building in transnational virtual exchange. The data suggests that previously lived international experiences assisted the instructors in capacity building within a virtual exchange and brought into question the role of cultural humility.

Keywords: virtual exchange, teacher collaboration, international education, virtual classrooms

INTRODUCTION

In the current climate, where mobility between and within countries is limited due to public health concerns surrounding the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and/or political disagreements, developing and implementing transnational, virtual learning experiences is an important method for building empathy and inter-cultural understanding among students of diverse backgrounds. While the 2019/2020 academic year brought forth a historic level of faculty opportunities to manage virtual exchanges (O'Dowd, 2021), there is limited research available on how teachers develop their capacity to build and deliver these types of courses.

The lack of research on capacity building for virtual exchange leaves faculty who initiate collaboration with another institution to do so without knowledge of the lessons learned from faculty who have previously collaborated in a virtual exchange. The aim of our study is to add to the existing literature focusing on how researchers and educators collaborate in a virtual exchange. It is our goal to share the process, through our own experiences and perceptions, that teachers go through as they co-develop and collaborate in teaching in a transnational virtual space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual Exchanges

Virtual exchange refers to the engagement of groups of learners in online environments for intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of coursework, while under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; O'Dowd, 2018). They have been shown to provide students with greater mobility without the traditional expenses of relocating to another country to pursue their formal education (Custer & Tuominen, 2017; de Wit, 2016; Elliott-Gower & Hill, 2015; Soliya, 2020). Virtual exchanges provide the ability for international partnership with universities, faculty, and students. Virtual exchanges can be subject specific, service led, and utilize shared resources such as a shared syllabus approach (O'Dowd, 2018).

Virtual exchanges are known to contribute comprehensively to internationalization at home (Lee & Cai, 2019; Morris et al., 2018), through improving cross-cultural understanding (Caluinau, 2019), promoting and developing global competencies (Bassani & Bachem, 2019; Toner, 2018), and fostering equity for their participants (Custer & Tuominen, 2017; de Wit, 2016; Elliott-Gower et al., 2015; Soliya, 2020). These online pedagogical platforms have been used by educators to promote multicultural competencies for students to navigate their interconnective world (Riel, 1993). Virtual exchanges also allow participants to gain differing perspectives from their own (Cifuentes et al., 2000).

The 2019/2020 academic year provided faculty historic levels of opportunities to facilitate virtual exchanges (O'Dowd, 2021) and yet, there are few resources available on how to build collaborative efforts in this space.

Collaborative Teaching

Faculty collaborations allow for professional growth and networking abilities. Christianakis (2010) states, "collaboration between different practitioners can offer opportunities for interdependence, diverse thought and blurred boundaries" (p. 113). This development of a collaborative community of practice allows for theory and practice connections to be made (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2022). Teachers' participation in collaborative efforts enables them to gain new comprehension of themselves as an educator, their pedagogical approach, and their course content (Johnson, 2009). In a virtual context, collaborative communities of practice promote teacher development among the faculty who participate (Macia & Garcia, 2016).

There has been support for collaborative teaching capacity building through community of practices in the context of COVID-19. Knight (2020) posited that online collaborations with already-established professional connections can help in overcoming isolation. Moreover, Knight (2020) offered four key principles for practitioners in virtual exchange collaborations; "(a) practitioners must participate in professional communities; (b) practitioners need to be granted enough time for development to occur; (c) mediators (both technical platforms and community leaders) have to provide ongoing support to practitioners; and (d) relationships among practitioners, regardless of their relative experience, are both collaborative and mutually beneficial" (p. 301). O'Dowd and Dooly (2022) found that teachers who participated in a community of practice for virtual exchange felt a sense of professional development as they implemented new innovative approaches in their teaching and expanded their professional network. While the existing literature does support the initiatives of virtual faculty collaborations, there is still limited research on the topic. The expansion of virtual exchange over the COVID-19 pandemic has called for a need to address faculty development within these changes.

Lived experiences can play a large role in teachers understanding their students' experiences within the classroom, through that of their own past lived events (Campbell, 2008). Within virtual exchange, exploratory and experiential practices have shown to support the complexities of this learning environment (Guichon, 2009; Hempel, 2009). Intercultural virtual exchanges have shown that the participants transformation of their identities occurs by confronting their values and beliefs with that of their peers (Wenger, 1998). Thus, the faculty role in utilizing and having an understanding based on their own past lived experiences seems to be vital in the success of their virtual exchanges.

Our collaborative research project seeks to address the question: To what extent do previous lived experiences mediate the process of teacher capacity building in a transnational virtual, collaborative exchange?

METHOD

This qualitative case study used collaborative autoethnographic methods (Cheng et al., 2014) to explore faculty experiences within a transnational virtual exchange. Yin (2008) defines a case study as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13). The boundary for this case study were the confines of our virtual exchange course between the University of Maryland (UMD) and Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). The collaborative autoethnographic approach within this case study is vital to understanding how our identities are connected to the culture of the societies we come from and have been exposed to and how these connections emerge in our teaching and the development of our virtual exchange (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Moreover, the collaborative autoethnographic approach is both the process and the product of “research and writing about personal lived experiences and their relationship to culture” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p.16-17) in narrative form. In the context of teaching, Coia and Taylor (2005) state that autoethnography “involves investigating our own selves and engaging in self/other analysis based on the understanding that teaching is a profoundly personal and social activity and cannot be accomplished well without self-awareness in a social context” (p.26). Thus, the collaborative autoethnographic methodological approach provides an important method of uncovering individual, social, and contextual factors in teacher capacity building.

Data Collection

For this project, we utilized a fully concurrent collaboration model as discussed by Ngunjiri et al. (2010) where data collection, analysis, and writing occurred in a collaborative process. Each step of the research methods therefore, involved an iterative process of group dialogue and collective decision-making.

Sample and Positionality

This collaborative autoethnography’s sample consisted of the four authors, who were also the four co-instructors for a virtual exchange. Two of the co-instructors were from the University of Maryland in the United States and two co-instructors were from Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong. The four co-instructors will be referred to by the researchers as a collective or by their names or identifiers as individuals. We include strategies for trustworthiness to ensure credibility by providing our positionality and adoption of transparent research methods (Shenton, 2004).

The researchers co-taught a collaborative virtual exchange course, “Global Leadership in a Virtual Context”, which is a long-running collaboration between PolyU and UMD that started in 2015/16 and continued through the 2021/22 academic year. This collaboration linked a service-learning course: *Socially*

Responsible Global Leadership in a Digital World, offered by the Department of Computing at PolyU; and a leadership studies course: *Global Leadership in a Virtual Context*, offered by the Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education at UMD. The maximum course size was 40 from PolyU and 25 from UMD. The two courses are full three-credit courses that last over a whole semester for UMD, and two semesters for PolyU. The collaboration took up approximately 40% of the course at both institutions. Operationally, five sessions of the course are given to the collaboration. During these five sessions, students meet online synchronously and are guided to work in stages on a joint project. Their project seeks to answer, “How do we learn to understand, analyze, and address complicated global problems while working with highly diverse groups of people and perspectives?”

Within a collaborative autoethnography, the researchers acknowledge their positionality by reflecting on their own experiences as they relate to capacity building as teachers - both individually and collectively in a transnational virtual exchange (Walker & Taylor, 2014). Three of the instructors have taught the virtual exchange course together for three years, and the four instructors have taught the course together for two years. To ensure transparency within the autoethnographic approach we adhered to three characteristics as outlined by Anderson (2006). First, the autoethnographers were full members of this research setting; second, all the researchers appear as co-authors of the published study; and third, all authors have been committed to the research agenda of this study (Anderson, 2006).

Interview Protocol

For this collaborative autoethnographic method, we collected data from semi-structured interviews. The Institutional Review Board office deemed this study as exempt due to the autoethnographic data collection. The researchers co-created a list of open-ended, semi-structured interview questions in connection to the research question: To what extent do previous lived experiences mediate the process of teacher capacity building in a transnational virtual, collaborative exchange?

Data collection consisted of the researchers working in pairs, one from UMD and one from PolyU, interviewing each other using the semi-structured interview guide. This structure allowed the researchers to probe for deeper understanding throughout the interview (Corbin et al., 2015). Interviews were conducted on a virtual teleconferencing platform for feasibility and were audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

A collaborative thematic analysis was used for the data analysis (Braun et al., 2006). First, the researchers listened to and read the transcripts from the recorded interviews. Each of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Second, we separately used open coding for the three transcripts that were not our own. All team members coded each of the transcripts apart from their own interview (Table

1). Third, we compared our codes within the same transcript for similarities and discrepancies. When there was a discrepancy in the coding, we came to a resolution as a team, consisting of the three coders. Member checks were performed to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We then looked across the codes for discrete categories and made connections between categories to organize the data under generated themes. The coding took place in a shared document so that researchers could build on each other's understanding, as well as identify areas of different/conflicting perspectives. Regular virtual meetings were held to engage in dialogue about the collaborative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1: Organization of Researcher Analysis of Transcript Data of other Team Members

Member	Grace	Stephen	Genevieve	Greg
Grace		X	X	X
Stephen	X		X	X
Genevieve	X	X		X
Greg	X	X	X	

Autoethnography is concerned not only with individual perspectives, but also with the social context of how those perspectives developed and played out (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Thus, the collaborative, iterative, dialogic research methodology allows us to probe more deeply at how individual members of the team were influenced by both our own lived experiences and our ongoing collaboration. The researchers decided together on the structure of the final article to be written, assigning individual writing sections, but continuing to collaborate on revising the themes as narratives.

FINDINGS

The focus of our research question aimed to describe to whether previous lived experiences mediate teacher capacity building in a transnational virtual exchange. We chose this focus because as we collaborated to plan and deliver the course, we were each drawing on our own personal experiences to help us envision the goals for the course, predict where students might struggle, design meaningful learning activities, and navigate our own professional collaboration and relationships. When using a collaborative autoethnography as a research method, we exchanged and constructed our stories together, and made new meanings of our experiences collectively throughout the research process. It is our intention to share the findings that directly connect to our research question, which may support other teachers in their collaborations and course designs using virtual exchange.

Drawing on Previous Lived Experiences

All four of the instructors involved in this course had previous experiences both internationally and as educators. Stephen and Greg also had previous experiences with online learning - either as an instructor or as a student. Throughout our collaboration, and as evidenced in our interviews, we each drew on these experiences in various moments - supporting our desire to engage with this type of transnational project; empathizing with students and predicting areas of struggle; designing the learning experiences for students; navigating our own professional, transdisciplinary and transnational collaboration; and supporting a sense of cultural and professional humility. Although the range of our personal experiences was quite different, some common themes supported us in working through these aspects of the project. The following sub-section headers organize the themes from our findings.

Desire to Engage in a Transnational Virtual Course

We all had previous experiences internationally which helped shape us into who we are as people and as educators. Partly as a result of those experiences, we all valued the experience of intercultural exchange for the students. However, to develop and execute the virtual exchange we had to work across time zones, different university policies, student expectations, and within our already-busy lives as instructors and faculty members, which was challenging. At times we found ourselves wondering, ‘why we are investing so many resources into this type of project?’ We found that we each brought forth personal value found from our previous intercultural exchanges and that the need for this type of course was a strong motivating force for each of us to continue to engage with the project. For example, Stephen and Greg mention two important experiences they had in understanding cultural differences:

Stephen: When I was 19, I went to the United States to study that was my first trip outside of Hong Kong, China and that for me is, is a real eye opener. When I started University as a freshman I had problems not just with the English, but also with a lot of the cultural aspects. Like even simple things like what kind of music do people listen to what kind of TV show that it was [sic] popular.

Greg spoke about the importance of immersive intercultural environment had on his understanding of students coming from different cultural backgrounds. He states, “I did research in Shanghai and taught English at a private language school in Shanghai. That was my first experience in teaching. I wanted to go to China because with over 300,000 Chinese students studying in the United States it was a really good place to start learning about Chinese culture.”

The previously lived experiences motivated the instructors to collaborate and execute a transnational virtual exchange. Each instructor found value in experiencing another culture and felt that their lessons learned were educational

and personal. Thus, it was important to each instructor to create a space for students to experience different cultures through a virtual exchange.

Empathizing with Students

One of the ways we drew on our personal lived experiences was that they provided the ability to be sensitive to how our students might feel when collaborating with students from another country on a course project and we tried to predict where they may struggle so that we could offer time to reflect and share challenges and successes. All the instructors experienced varying degrees of cultural struggles during their past international educational experiences. Our lived experiences enabled us to be empathic with the students and foreshadow when we might need to provide more support during the virtual exchange. For example, Genevieve shared her experiences working in Barcelona, Spain, where she did not speak the primary language of Catalan and was still learning Spanish.

Genevieve: My experience living in a country where the language spoken [Spanish] was my second language and [I was] actually living in Barcelona, so it wasn't really Spanish. I mean, they speak Catalan, which is another language, which I didn't speak at all except for basic readings. But then we shared the second language together of Spanish, but I think realizing that I couldn't express my full understanding of a topic because I didn't have the language tools to say what I wanted to say. Or I was also super shy as a language learner. So, I didn't want to say something incorrectly. I just wouldn't say anything. So, I think also being mindful of those experiences when working with, say, the students from Hong Kong [for] whom English might not be their first language so just trying to keep that in mind as well I think was a really important experience for me to then have to bring forward as a teacher.

Stephen states, "I understand virtual exchange is difficult. It takes a lot of effort; a lot of resources. But the results are really worth the effort. We can see some of the students are making an effort to learn to adapt. They [the students] are opening up more than when they started."

Genevieve's experience on language competences in a foreign environment allowed for her to empathize with students in the PolyU/UMD virtual exchange. Whereas Stephen related the challenges of co-developing a transnational virtual exchange with the challenges students face when collaborating on a course project and that there is a need for persistence and resiliency. We recognize the importance of faculty being empathic to engage and foster the growth of the students within a virtual exchange setting.

Supporting a Sense of Cultural and Professional Humility.

All four of us, in different ways, speak about the need for humility - both culturally and professionally. That sense of humility arose from our previous

experiences and fostered our own growth and ability to collaborate with one another in order to create a virtual exchange for our students. For example, Greg talks about his previous work with international students coming from China to study in the U.S. and the need to understand both education systems and cultures.

Greg: There needs to be a lot more humility and that's kind of the approach that I took with my master's thesis was I really need to understand culture, language, backgrounds of these students that I'm going to be serving and working with and also understand the Chinese education system that they're leaving from and kind of the challenges and barriers that they're going to face when they come to the United States and how American college is different from Chinese colleges.

Grace talked about the importance of showing humility within the collaboration of the transnational virtual classroom.

Grace: We were very conscious that this was a collaboration between institutions. We were very grateful for the fact that our students have this opportunity to go on an exchange without going on an exchange, so to speak. That was the idea behind the global classroom. We were also very conscious that UMD must also feel that their students have gained in the same way. We must be contributing something to the whole experience that the other side could not have gotten where they were on their own.

Humility and cultural understanding played a large role within capacity building for all faculty members teaching the course. Understanding their own limitations and wanting to contribute towards the collective learning outcomes of the entire exchange was seen as very important. Bringing together students from different cultures and supporting the growth of all those involved both as faculty and student participation was something that could have happened without the transnational virtual exchange.

Supporting the Transnational Virtual Partnership

One of the strengths of the work we did together was the supportive and collaborative nature of our partnership. Through the interviews, it became clear that this was something we were all working hard to achieve, connecting to both our previous experiences as well as our sense of humility, and willingness to support one another. This can be seen from all four of us in the following excerpts.

Grace: Assume that the other side knows more than you do, is more experienced than you are. And ultimately, you know the relationship that is built is the most important thing, right, not to see it as a transaction. Not to see it as a contract or as a project, but to see it as a relationship.

Greg: I was definitely cognizant going in, where it's like, [the previous instructor] is going to finish with her PhD in like minutes or momentarily. [Grace] and Stephen are professors at their institution. So, coming in as a first-year doctoral student, even though I would say I do have, like all these other experiences, I was definitely looking at it with the lens of...going into it with everyone else has more experience and more knowledge in this, than me. And that's kind of like why I took that observer role kind of more at the beginning.

Genevieve: I think it's exciting to be exposed to new ways of thinking about teaching and designing lessons and that was really beneficial for me to hear different ways of approaching, or even thinking about designing [lessons]. And, I think it was a good experience for me to listen and hear where maybe there was something that I could offer but also try not to overstep into a space where things already worked a certain way. It was a good experience of trying to balance listening and reflecting, but still wanting to contribute.

Stephen: We've been trying to find different ways to work together [with UMD], including having virtual [exchanges] classes, including having projects, and sending students to each other's university for more export experience and exposure. I think it is important that we all approach this with a lot of respect for each other, doing our best to be accommodating. And I think we all learn something useful from that.

Developing and executing a transnational virtual exchange provided the instructors with opportunities to learn teaching pedagogy from one another. The outcomes of the transnational virtual exchange included professional development for each of us as we were able to observe three instructors engage with the course material and students.

DISCUSSION

Findings in Light of Previous Research

The data suggest that previously lived international experiences did assist the instructors in capacity building within a virtual exchange. The faculty were able to recall their previously lived experiences when course planning, as well as show empathy towards their students. We were able to learn from each other's previously lived experiences. These lived experiences fostered motivation within engagement in the virtual exchange, as well as entrenching a rich dedication to the course. We also found a sense of supporting a cultural and professional environment based on humility.

Our study describes how faculty with previous international educational lived experiences collaborated and advanced their teaching capacities when planning and delivering a transnational virtual exchange. The focus for this study is a departure from the previous work of O'Dowd and Dooly (2022), who describe

training faculty to deliver virtual exchanges to increase their professional development and utilization of innovative pedagogical approaches. Our approach focused on exchanging and constructing our stories from our previous lived experiences as well as the process of planning and delivering a transnational virtual exchange. We posit that this reflective practice is important to facilitate teaching capacity in virtual exchange.

Moreover, our study expands on Knight's (2020) study, which offered four key principles in virtual exchange collaborations. We posit there should be an expansion to include a fifth principle. Knight (2020) provides the following four key principles: "(a) practitioners must participate in professional communities; (b) practitioners need to be granted enough time for development to occur; (c) mediators (both technical platforms and community leaders) have to provide ongoing support to practitioners; and (d) relationships among practitioners, regardless of their relative experience, are both collaborative and mutually beneficial" (p. 301). We postulate that a fifth key principle in faculty participation within virtual exchange collaborations is to call on and share previously lived experiences with co-facilitators to support the growth, and viability of these virtual partnerships.

This fifth key principle draws on elements of collaboration building and a virtual community of practice and draws from Christianakis (2010) that blurs the boundaries of diverse thought and Marcia and Garcia (2016) allowing for innovation and teaching capacities to develop. Recalling lived experiences to enhance the virtual exchange has allowed for the instructors to support the complex nature of the virtual exchanges (Campbell, 2008; Guichon, 2009; Hempel, 2009). It has also allowed for instructors to understand the complex components that go into transnational classrooms, not only from designing the course from the point-of-view of the students and their learning outcomes, but from elements of their own capacities as instructors.

Limitations and Conclusion

This study has several limitations. The first is that all of four of the researchers in the study had previous international educational lived experiences, either as students and/or teachers. While these previous international lived experiences did appear to aid in the cultural understanding and in building educators' capacity to teach in a transnational virtual exchange, we cannot say that previously international educational lived experiences are a necessity to the ability to design or teach in this type of learning environment. The second limitation is the unpredictability of how readers will feel when reading the article, which may bring feelings of unpleasantness (Mendez, 2013). Third and finally, is the limitation of the generalization of the findings due to the use of the autoethnographic case study approach (Nurani, 2008).

While we have seen a historic number of virtual exchanges offered since the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic (O'Dowd, 2021), we still need to offer trainings, and time for course development including reflection on passed lived

experiences for faculty. The previously lived experiences played an invaluable role in the success of our course and the capacity building for us as educators.

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