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Studying Abroad at Home? A Virtual International Experience

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Abstract: During the period of remote learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, honors programs were forced to innovate new digital possibilities for fulfilling the objectives of an honors education. Learning experiences offered during study abroad programs were among the most difficult to provide in a virtual format. The honors program at Eastern Michigan University has developed the Virtual International Experience (VIE) in response to this need. Even as the 2022–2023 academic year marked a transition back to traditional in-person classes, the VIE offers unique tools for learning skills of cultural analysis and cross-cultural communication, particularly as these occur in remote contexts, something that is becoming increasingly relevant. As three students who participated in the VIE and the professor who created it, the authors have taken this second shift in instructional format as an opportunity to consider the advantages of tools acquired during remote learning while also reaffirming the irreplaceable value of traditional study abroad programs.

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INTRODUCTION

For many students, studying abroad is an important part of the college experience. When they enrolled in 2019, Eastern Michigan University (EMU) students Sarah Shafi, Camryn Smith, and Valentyna Stadnik built their schedules and planned their budgets so that they would eventually be

able to study in Spain and Germany. Stadnik ultimately chose a major that required study abroad and was accepted into her program of choice while Smith and Shafi both chose a program that would allow them to explore internationally and test out their interests in studying culture and the Spanish language. Then, in March of 2020, COVID-19 was declared an international emergency. By July of the same year, EMU's study abroad office canceled its programs, offered students a refund, and recommended speaking with advisors about missing graduation requirements.

Like other collegiate honors programs, the EMU Honors College looked for alternatives to international study that could satisfy both students' desires for cross-cultural exploration and the requirements of academic programs. By incorporating faculty expertise with synchronous and asynchronous technologies, programs have been able to create positive learning experiences that have outlasted the pandemic's period of compulsory remote learning (Thompson 210). The Virtual International Experience (VIE) at EMU is one such program that began as an intensive one-week online program based on the work of anthropology professor María Luz García in Guatemala that fulfilled honors requirements for global engagement and cultural competency. Even as the 2022–2023 academic year marked a transition back to traditional in-person classes, the success and popularity of the VIE prove its ongoing importance to the EMU Honors College. As three students who participated in the VIE and the professor who created it, we have taken this second shift in instructional format as an opportunity to consider the advantages of tools acquired during remote learning while also reaffirming the irreplaceable value of traditional study abroad programs.

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY'S VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

García constructed the VIE together with Maya colleagues in Nebaj, El Quiché, Guatemala, the largest city in the Ixil Maya region where García has worked as an anthropologist since 2001 and often guides student research and works with in-person study abroad trips. Beginning in 2020, she created the VIE as a series of four synchronous online meetings during which students met in both large and small groups as well as asynchronous activities hosted through the Canvas learning platform. She then sent students daily email updates with links to relevant social media and attached photographs. After five sessions, the VIE week now begins with emailed descriptions of the drive to Nebaj from the Guatemala City airport and links to a video tour of

the neighborhood by Juan Romeo Guzaro Luis, the Ixil coordinator in Nebaj. Students then have the opportunity to meet other students in the program during a synchronous meet-and-greet and a subsequent question-and-answer session with a preliminary overview of the Ixil Mayan language spoken in Nebaj. Daily updates include information about local events such as the birth of a litter of puppies by García's adopted dog and the events of a festival celebrating the town's patron saint, which coincides with the summer sessions of the VIE. Students also watch video introductions from the Nebaj residents whom they will meet during synchronous meetings later in the program. After that, they study two video lectures from García on the background of the region and on ethnographic methods as well as ten short unnarrated videos of the marketplace. They then have the opportunity to apply these methods in the first of two written assignments as they note observations about the marketplace videos on a worksheet that they submit for immediate instructor feedback.

As a program capstone, students meet in small teams to discuss their observations of the materials provided with a focus on the marketplace and to prepare for a culminating interview with one to three people from Nebaj. During their preparatory session, students deliberate on how to elicit more information about the market and about their own specific interests using observations of the materials. Ethnographic interviews occur the next day with the small teams of four or five students guiding conversations with Ixil people in Nebaj and García acting as interpreter. The program concludes with a final written assignment, a reflection on their experiences in the program and response to the analytic question that was posed at the beginning of the program: "What can we learn about the social and cultural organization of the Ixil area by studying the market?" Students also submit informal feedback through a Google form to influence future iterations of the VIE.

After two years and numerous stages of the pandemic as well as changes in university responses, we find the VIE to be a unique platform that is well-suited to honors learning contexts. Students actively engage in opportunities to develop analytic frameworks for thinking about cultural differences that begin with an understanding of themselves as culturally situated, and they develop skills of cross-cultural communication on increasingly relevant virtual platforms. Ultimately, the VIE provides both the professor and students an opportunity to engage in academic exchanges that prioritize the role of play, curiosity, and enjoyment, something that enhances the collegiate experience through the changing context of the pandemic.

THE VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AS A VEHICLE FOR TEACHING CULTURAL ANALYSIS

The VIE was designed to help students meet honors requirements in cultural competency and global engagement. Learning objectives include the following, which will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections:

- the ability to appropriately situate students' own cultural backgrounds by understanding their own perspectives as culturally specific while avoiding analyzing Ixil culture only in terms of their own cultural expectations;
- an understanding of culture as dynamic, experienced by people from diverse perspectives and adapting to changing circumstances; and
- an appreciation for the relationship between language and culture.

Crucial to the program's success in meeting these objectives has been promoting student engagement during the synchronous meetings with Ixil partners, and, indeed, we have been thoughtful in doing so. During the five sessions of the VIE, we experimented with ways to balance the freedom for students to explore topics of individual interest with the focus necessary to analyze a single shared topic in-depth—namely, the central marketplace in Nebaj—within a program both academically and personally satisfying for students.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE ON ITS OWN TERMS

One of the biggest challenges that students face in their cultural analysis during the VIE is the initial tendency to view the Ixil culture of Nebaj exclusively in terms of comparison to their own cultures, and generally as deficient. Using the videos and photographs of the market, students respond to prompts that guide them through their analysis of the market (including questions like "What do you notice about the physical space?" "What does the way that the space is arranged tell you about how people use the market?" "What did you notice about how people use the space?"). García then provides detailed feedback on their responses, often redirecting their analysis from observations about the lack of shopping carts, price tags, and aisles with shelves to a focus on the patterns that they could find in the materials that they had available. Then, during small group discussions in preparation for their ethnographic conversation, students work together on their preliminary

analysis and design questions to ask Ixil partners to help them understand these patterns better. This process, together with direct explanations from García, leads to a re-centering of the analysis. As students learn unexpected details about the area, they start to understand the market from the experience of the Ixil partners instead of solely in relation to their own experiences.

Student observations in a recent session about Ixil clothing are an excellent example of this change in perspective. Students initially described the long red skirts of the Ixil women that they saw in the market as identical and in contrast to the distinctiveness of American fashion subcultures and personal expression. Some even wrote about the "lack of freedom" of Ixil women in their clothing choices. However, after García highlighted this mode of dress as an expression of ethnic Ixil identity, students began to notice a greater variation in woven designs and other details of dress and hypothesized on the choice of one design over another. Later, in conversations with Ma'l B'alay Raymundo Pérez, an Ixil woman who met with several of the groups, they learned about what type of skirt a woman might choose to wear to sleep, to work at home, to go out to the market, or to go to a wedding or a festival. By the end of the program, students had learned how skirt patterns and colors revealed where the wearer was likely from and how figures woven into shirts and shawls reflected local history, creation stories, fashion trends, and personal artistic choices. Students even gained an appreciation for the disagreement between a local Maya priest and some women after woven shirts (huipiles) with figures wearing baseball caps became popular despite these not being part of Ixil beliefs about creation.

Some students also initially noted the Nebaj marketplace's lack of standing aisles and booths in indoor spaces such as those found in American supermarkets. García asked the small groups to instead look for patterns in how food was sold, such as what items were grouped together and how they were displayed, and to think about the questions that they could ask to understand better why some vendors sold from tables while others used only a basket. Ultimately, students developed an appreciation for the place of the market in local Ixil economies where a vendor can be a career salesperson with a rented stand or someone looking to occasionally sell extra produce from their own gardens or fields.

Furthermore, students observed a conversation between a shopper and a seller, correctly deducing that bargaining was commonplace at the Ixil market. However, they were encouraged to form hypotheses as to how regular bargaining would affect an individual's relationship to the economy. To

answer the question, students first had to figure out their own relationship to the economy that they are part of and then deduce the role of fixed prices in that context. During conversations with Raymundo Pérez, they learned about the complex system of relationships that determine how Ixil people settle on prices in ways that reflect larger knowledge of the economic relationships in which each person participates. Decisions about prices included knowledge of the products that another might have to offer and their connection to networks of family relationships that are simultaneously social and economic.

Students also noticed that most marketplace-goers wore masks during the videos from 2020, a significant difference from concurrent practices that students noted in their own U.S. experiences. Here, as opposed to a deficit, students attributed a greater community orientation to the Ixil public. During the interviews, the Ixil coordinator Guzaro Luis was surprised to hear that personal protective equipment had a strong political connotation in the U.S. Rather than finding meanings related to community welfare or individual freedom, Guzaro Luis said that market-goers wore the mask to keep themselves healthy and because the police required it, but that it was rarely a topic of discussion. Instead, among other things, the Nebaj mayor's failure to provide aid during a time when food prices were soaring was much more contentious. The U.S.- and Nebaj-based groups became engrossed in conversation about their respective political experiences of the pandemic, and through the interaction students were reminded that meanings attached to mask-wearing or mayoral importance were cultural and had to be understood in context rather than applying quick descriptions such as *community oriented.*

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE AS DYNAMIC

When encountering a new culture, as the students in the VIE did, students often have difficulty recognizing the internal diversity of a culture and the ways that it changes over time. However, several examples during the VIE helped students to realize that, much as in their own cultures, Ixil culture changed in response to external and internal factors, creating generational differences in beliefs that clashed at times and converged at others.

For example, students were curious about the role of dogs in Ixil culture after having seen them in the videos of the market. During the group sessions, García told one group of students that older generations generally viewed them as a nuisance in public spaces and as work companions or guardians of the home in their personal lives. Students were then initially surprised when they talked with Guzaro Luis, a young man in his 20s, who told students that

he had taken in a number of dogs from the street and that recent laws forbidding the mistreatment of animals have followed from the establishment of organizations to capture, protect, and find permanent homes for dogs without owners. Instead of nuisances or guardians, stray dogs were becoming pets in the eyes of the younger Ixil generation.

Likewise, students often commented on a video by Guzaro Luis in which his mother demonstrated carrying her groceries in a shawl rather than in unecological disposable plastic bags. Students initially concluded that Ixil people were thus environmentally conscious, something that aligned with stereotypes that they were familiar with about Indigenous peoples. However, after further prompting, students noticed that most people in the market actually used small disposable plastic bags for individual products, which they then carried inside larger reusable bags. They didn't observe anyone using a shawl to carry produce. During the interviews, Ixil partners identified convenience as the reason for their use of reusable bags. The sentiments expressed by Guzaro Luis and his mother were not shared by all the Ixil people that students talked to. In fact, other student groups found that Guzaro Luis's mother herself told them during interviews that she often used reusable bags with smaller disposable plastic bags to shop as well, but she thought it important to express these environmental values and to demonstrate in the video how older generations had carried their produce in the past (and indeed still do today when buying small amounts).

UNDERSTANDING THE CENTRAL ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN CULTURE

Although students did not acquire any measure of fluency in the Ixil Mayan language, they learned simple greetings for both younger and older individuals as well as the use of the noun classifiers of *nan* and *pap*, something like *Mrs.* and *Mr.* in the English language, respectively. In addition to using these phrases during the interview, students also gained a sense of the use of the Ixil Mayan language according to age and gender by observing García's interactions with her Ixil colleagues.

Students encountered one of their greatest communicative hurdles while discussing methods to create a comfortable atmosphere at the beginning of the ethnographic interviews. Following their own common strategies for initiating a conversation, students came up with questions regarding favorite foods and hobbies. However, questions about favorite foods were not familiar

cross-culturally, and students interviewing older women found that they did not organize their time into discrete categories such as work and hobbies that the students took for granted. They then reflected on the social work that these questions usually accomplish in their day-to-day interactions and how they might accomplish something similar in interactions with Ixil people.

Just as the students considered how to adjust their own speech to fit conversations with Ixil people, they also learned to be appropriate listeners and respondents in this context. During one session, an older Ixil woman asked one of the students if her parents were living or not and then admonished her to take care of her elders. She then advised the rest of the students to study hard and offered them a blessing. Although questions about one's parents in a classroom setting were unusual for students, they needed to find ways to respond that were both respectful of their Ixil interlocutors and within what they were comfortable sharing with other students whom they had only recently met.

As Spanish is the official language of Guatemala, students inquired as to the relationship between Spanish and the Ixil Mayan language, which is spoken as a native language by the majority of people in Nebaj. As Guzaro Luis is trained as a teacher, he explained that although Spanish remains the primary language of instruction, laws requiring that the education system be bilingual and bicultural and changing attitudes in the educational community are leading to a greater official incorporation of Ixil Mayan in schools. Nonetheless, in their conversations with Raymundo Pérez, who had studied in one of the leading Guatemalan universities to become a physical therapist, students learned that university courses are generally taught in Spanish, contributing to ongoing racism that hinders access to higher education.

Ultimately, students began to consider the role of language in sociocultural interactions and the influence of institutional reform on language use. They learned not only through direct instruction in language learning lessons and supplemental sessions on grammar but through observation of García and the Ixil participants' interactions with each other and through their own participation in conversations with the program's Ixil hosts.

THE VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AS A TOOL TO TEACH IN REMOTE CONTEXTS

Yarrison writes that "honors education was never meant to be a virtual offering" (185), and indeed the learning and experience of study abroad cannot be replicated in a virtual context. Although the fact that students could

access the program from their own homes was a strength in making the VIE accessible to students despite pandemic conditions, economic restrictions, or home responsibilities, it was also a limitation. Immersion is one of the hallmarks of study abroad, as a student cannot simply close the computer when confronted with something unexpected or uncomfortable. Instead, they learn to develop new ways of living, at least for a time, in the company of other students and people in the host country, and they form transformative relationships. Study abroad as an in-person experience is irreplaceable both as a student "rite of passage" and as a learning experience.

Nonetheless, the pandemic changed how universities approach remote learning, and the demand for online programs is unlikely to disappear. EMU has not fully resumed in-person study abroad programs, but even as it does, there are plans for the VIE to continue as a specifically virtual offering that does not take the place of study abroad but rather offers its own contributions to student learning. In written feedback after the program, some students commented that they had been hesitant and perhaps even uninterested in studying abroad, but after their experience with the VIE, they now felt inclined to pursue in-person options when they become available. Other students who felt that finances were a restriction now looked to pursue scholarship opportunities, and students with responsibilities such as work and caretaking that would not allow them to physically leave the country were glad to have the opportunity to learn in such an international context where they otherwise would not have had the possibility.

The VIE is also an opportunity to consider accessibility in teaching practices more broadly, particularly in the context of different kinds of international experiences. Traditional study abroad programs are not necessarily inaccessible to students with varying abilities or disabilities, nor are virtual options automatically more accessible. Accessibility must be a part of the design in both traditional study abroad and in remote international programs. Because virtual programs and traditional study abroad programs have different objectives, virtual programs should not be seen as a substitute for in-person study abroad, either for students who cannot afford traditional programs or for those for whom traditional programs are inaccessible. Rather, honors educators are challenged to consider how to make the benefits of both types of programs available to a wide range of students.

Students and professors alike have experienced the challenges of virtual instruction, but developing the skills to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this medium has become both an academic and a professional

necessity. Both instructors and students have developed a shared awareness of norms of successful interaction online, including shared commitment to creating a positive learning and working environment. In the VIE, we found the importance of the instructor and students turning on video cameras when possible and dedicating significant time and energy to building rapport with groups of students and across cultural differences.

As a recent graduate, Smith has seen the importance of what the VIE taught about building virtual communities. In an internship at the Henry Ford museum in Dearborn, Michigan, Smith has led several Zoom meetings with employees from all over the institution. The value of having experience navigating and facilitating in virtual spaces has proven to be essential in making her stand out in virtual environments. In addition, Smith has recently applied for a fellowship in which the entire hiring process has taken place virtually. The last component in which professionals select finalists was an all-day virtual event for which candidates had to conduct group interviews. Smith had to know her strengths and recognize the strengths of other candidates, skills that she had practiced during the VIE. The VIE prepared Smith in ways she had not anticipated to interact and connect with people for a brief period of time while working toward a common goal.

As a fourth-year education student, Shafi has witnessed firsthand the relevance of the VIE and its methods of virtually building community to the field of virtual and hybrid education. In her administrative role as part of the Ford Community Corps' intergenerational Spanish language program, she has conducted virtual Zoom meetings that require communication among students and educators of different age and cultural demographics to teach the Spanish language. Her previous experiences during the VIE in considering how to interact virtually with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds has proven vital to building a sustainable educational community on a digital platform. Additionally, the VIE has helped prepare her to be an educator on culturally authentic material through virtual avenues of communication, such as through the ethnographic Zoom interviews in the program.

CONCLUSION

The Virtual International Experience was developed as an alternative during a time when in-person travel was impossible. As traditional study abroad opportunities reopen, EMU's experience with the VIE offers the opportunity to consider what tools we have gained from remote instruction and how they can be appropriately applied going forward. It can be useful to consider the

advantages that virtual activities provide when compared to their in-person counterparts, but our experiences with the VIE have encouraged us to consider the merits of virtual and in-person activities in their own right as well and to develop the potential of these elements for student learning. The VIE cannot provide students with the full immersion in the details of everyday life that being physically present in a foreign context does. That experience is unique and must be valued in its own right. However, the VIE offers a structure for instructors to guide students through their interpretations of another culture, first through a slower and more detached form of observation from a distance and then through their preparations for and engagement with real-time interactions. The remote format offers instructors the space to identify the pitfalls of initial student analysis and to guide students as they engage with people whose cultural background is very different from their own and to recognize culture on its own terms, as dynamic, and in conjunction with language.

In implementing virtual international programs like the VIE at other institutions, several elements of the VIE have been important to the program's success. Typical of honors education, the VIE depends heavily on faculty expertise. As an activity that is designed to teach students about cross-cultural communication and analysis, it is especially suited to instruction from an anthropological perspective, although lenses from global sociology or area studies could be productive as well. Likewise, similar to effective traditional study abroad programs, the VIE requires the instructor to be fluent in the languages and communication norms of the area and familiar enough with the context to be flexible in responding to unanticipated student observations, questions, and interests.

However, one of the most important elements of the VIE is the enthusiastic participation of international partners and a strong collaborative relationship with the instructor. The two main Ixil partners, Juan Romeo Guzaro Luis and Ma'l B'alay Raymundo Pérez, both have significant backgrounds in education and in work with U.S. students. Their enthusiastic participation in interactions with students as well as their dedication to working with García in preparing VIE materials were key to student engagement. Although the particular configuration of relationships and expertise involved in this program are unique to EMU's VIE, similarly long-lasting collaborative relationships and depths of local knowledge often characterize anthropological fieldwork. Virtual international programs can provide a format for instructors to make the benefits of that expertise and local connections available to student learning in an innovative way.

Although Shafi, Smith, and Stadnik will now seek out international experiences outside of college, participating in the VIE helped them to build relationships and to learn new skills and perspectives that will serve them in academic and professional pursuits. Moving forward, students and universities will need to be able to develop tools for engaging cross-culturally in remote contexts. Programs like the VIE are an experiment in this direction that deserve a permanent home as part of honors curricula.

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