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Virtual Exchange Program as Part of the Internationalization of the Curriculum Strategy in a Mexican Context: An Ethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the findings of the information collected during a Virtual Exchange Pilot Program carried out with university students from Greece, Mexico, and Japan as part of the Internationalization of the Curriculum Strategy in a Mexican context. In Mexico, Higher Education Institutions have suffered from budget cuts over the years which has severely impacted on mobility and exchange programs forcing educative administrators to look for alternatives in this matter. This pilot program was carried out during the first semester of 2024. The information was collected with the ethnographic approach and supported the participant observation technique during written, imagery, and videorecorded participations analyzed with free coding. The pilot program has shown that making use of the resources available, internationalization of the curriculum is possible providing students with the opportunity of exposing students with people from other cultures, and to live the experience of interacting with students their own age.

Keywords: Compassion, Intercultural Competence, Internationalization, Internationalization of the Curriculum, Virtual Exchange Program

Studies have been carried out by foreign faculty or scholars on the number of students who have been part of a mobility program, the places they have been to,

and the benefits in terms of education and research, but the literature on the results of a virtual international exchange is scarce. In Mexico due to budgetary cuts to education, mobility has become a memory, educative actors find themselves in the need of implementing other alternatives for creating opportunities for students to be exposed both to another language and culture so they can become global citizens.

Private Higher Education Institutions demonstrate to have solid finances, so they continue with regular mobility programs, as for public Higher Education Institutions becomes difficult as they depend on government economic support, therefore the need to provide internationalization alternatives such as international agreements with foreign institutions, teaching a second language, and the Internationalization of the Curriculum, moreover, one that does not require an additional expense but does help achieve students' learning outcomes. The university where this study was carried out is the state and public university with more than 10,000 students divided into its 12 knowledge areas or departments. Students from the Business and Administrative area or department, in particular Marketing students had had little opportunity of interacting with people from other cultures because of the world health confinement due to COVID 19 in previous years, and one of the subjects they were enrolled in allowed the natural fit for this program.

The objective of this study was to explore which students' intercultural competence skills can be developed through compassion during a Virtual Exchange Program [IVE]. The ethnographic research was selected as it is a qualitative method used for collecting information through observation. The findings show that participants of the IVE developed the attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity and discovery. They also understood that there is no superior culture, they all have strengths as well as areas of opportunity, and every culture can learn positive traits from each other.

It was concluded that being interculturally competent does not only mean obtaining a certificate, as it involves doing instead of saying, interacting for developing certain skills, and leading by example so others can learn, and as the next generation of professionals they need specific abilities for an effective performance in the laboral market as a global citizen.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization

The concept has been understood as a triad, the joining of the terms international, intercultural and global dimensions. The closest definition provided by Knight (2015) is that Internationalization is the process of integrating an international or intercultural dimension into teaching mainly, not excluding research and the services in a Higher Education Institution. The idea of forming international students becomes an imperative in higher Education Institutions. An

international student is a student that moves from one country to another pursuing education in a host country (Bista, 2016).

As the world continued to become more interconnected, because of Globalization, universities needed “to have international, foreign language and intercultural skills to be able to interact in a global setting” according to Hénard et al. (2012, p. 7). For Buckner (2019) Internationalization was the knowledge economy discourse, and education in universities was expected to form in a variety of intercultural competencies so graduate could participate in global labor markets.

An important educative agent for internationalization is faculty, as the person in this role must have international academic experience either from studying abroad or acting as a visiting professor. Another relevant activity is participating in international networks which involve working with people from different cultures, perspectives and ways of solving problems, which enrich the faculty’s global vision and can enable the person to carry out internationalization activities in a higher education institution (Romani-Dias et al., 2019).

In recent decades, Internationalization has changed from the international or global dimension to international cooperation and academic mobility involving the terms at home and abroad for teachers, students and the curriculum supported by information and communication technologies with distance and online learning (Oliveira Barbosa & Baeta Neves, 2020). Being this latter, an enhancing digital tool to provide access, learning and collaboration creating new patterns of mobility and virtual exchange (De Wit & Merckx, 2022).

Internationalization of the Curriculum

The Internationalization of the Curriculum is defined by Leask (2015) as the inclusion of learning and teaching and a component of both the formal and the informal curriculum, which will engage students with internationally informed research, cultural, and linguistic diversity and purposefully develop their international and intercultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens.

For Leask et al. (2018) indicate that for the Internationalization of the Curriculum to be inclusive and accessible, it is imperative that the following conditions are met:

- a) Efforts are expected to be achieved as a group by scholars, practitioners, and stakeholders.
- b) Integration of Internationalization with other agendas at an institutional, regional, and national level with disciplinary and professional faculty.
- c) Quality of education with an integrated policy and strategy to enhance partnership between institutions worldwide.

Once the previous conditions are met, the path for the Internationalization of the Curriculum at home is created (De Wit, 2019) or in words of Peña (2019) connectivism approach-based on Internationalization of the Curriculum, in this concept a university is perceived as a system whose goals, strategies, and methods must be redefined in order to establish networks designed for learning and communication with the rest of society. The curriculum is constructed through

analog, and digital access to knowledge and experiences to prepare them to behave like global professionals; the experience should also be designed as a dynamic, collaborative, and learning environment (Aponte & Peña, 2018).

What follows is to establish a regulatory framework for the institutional, the academic program and the learning environment categories from the connectivism approach as suggested by Aponte & Jordan (2020):

Table 1: Criteria for the Internationalization of the Curriculum with a Connectivism Approach

| Institutional | Academic Program | Learning environment |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Culture | Career program | Formative processes |
| Institutional normative | Global profile | Innovative pedagogies |
| Educational model | Strategic plan | Intercultural sensitivity |
| Strategic plan | Study plans | Global citizenship |
| Curriculum policy | | Content |
| | | Learning outcomes |
| | | Classroom practices |
| | | Evaluation |

One main reason for implementing this IVE was the need for opportunities for authentic English practice outside the classroom, necessity that can be met with a mobility program, the IVE provides a solution to this problem. Students can be immersed in the target language but also be exposed to other cultures, thus fostering desired abilities of an intercultural orientation (Higgins, 2024).

Additionally, Cuevas Álvarez et al. (2024) highlight the benefits of the connectivism approach for the three main educative actors:

- a) Administrators: Use of an educational platform for a transparent process for supervision, control and follow-up of responsibilities.
- b) Professors: Materials, resources, and activities provided in advance to students prior to lessons.
- c) Students: Sense of empathy, better interactions, building trust, transparent assignments, feedback, the development of global skills to become a better citizen and a skilled professional.

One example that worths the mention is the University of Sonora located to the north of Mexico. This institution began with the implementation of Internationalization of the curriculum by teaching subjects in English, and the establishing of regulations called Guidelines for the Curricular Component, in other words, the inclusion of 15% mandatory subjects in both English and Spanish languages in all the programs at a pregrade level which later led to another

situation, the necessity of the intercultural dimension and the achievement through a virtual environment (González Bello y García Meza, 2021).

International Virtual Exchange

IVE is an appropriate element of the connectivism approach, as it suits the criteria previously mentioned, such as mentoring by professors, it provides support to students' learning, and it can help relieve administrators from the weight and the cost of mobility (Fernández Gutiérrez et al., 2022).

For Tokas et al. (2023) there are different motivations for doing mobility from an economic perspective, they range from economic, psychological, and behavioral; whereas from a non-economic perspective the motivations derive from the human capital theory, which involves investing in skills and knowledge through education with the idea of increasing productivity or future earnings; so Higher Education Administrators should be orienting these activities to meeting students' personal motivations.

It is necessary to differentiate two key concepts, Virtual Exchange versus Virtual Mobility. According to Giralt et al. (2022) Virtual Exchange refers to technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs with the main element of collaboration and exchange between participants in order to develop specific skills such as intercultural competence and digital literacies. Contrary to Virtual Mobility which is oriented towards providing subject knowledge either in a specific knowledge area or a topic not taught at the university of origin. It does not require interaction nor collaboration.

Some experts have highlighted the benefits as well as differences between this learning modality and mobility, in every case the IVE (International Virtual Exchange) was the appropriate method for developing intercultural competence as indicated by authors on IVE papers found during the literature review:

Table 2: State of the art on International Virtual Exchanges

| Author | Year | Benefit/Difference | Method |
|------------------|-------------|--|---------------|
| O'Dowd | 2018 | Peer-to-peer interaction | IVE |
| Baroni et al. | 2019 | Impact on teacher education | IVE |
| Rienties et al. | 2020 | Foreign language competence | IVE |
| O'Dowd | 2021 | Effectiveness of IVE | IVE |
| Commander et al. | 2022 | Intercultural effectiveness across disciplines | IVE |

Note: Adapted from "The Impact of International Virtual Exchange on Student Success", J. Lee, J. Leibowitz, J. Rezek, M. Millea & G. Saffo, 2022, *Journal of International Students*, 12(S3), 77-95. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12iS3.4593>

Theoretical Framework

From the existing theories, it was determined that the Process Model of Intercultural Competence was the most appropriate to support the expected skills as an outcome of the Virtual Exchange Program, the formal, and the informal curriculum.

Intercultural Competence

This competence is defined as the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions (Deardoff, 2006). This model consists of three categories and their corresponding elements, which are explained as follow:

- 1) Attitudes: a) respect: valuing other cultures; b) openness: withholding judgment; c) curiosity & discovery: tolerating ambiguity.
- 2) Knowledge & comprehension: Cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness.
- 3) Skills: To listen, observe, evaluate, analyze, interpret, and relate.

Compassion

According to Martin's findings presented in the report Future Directions in Compassion Science, compassion in a training can help develop and improve the psychological safety and well-being in people to mitigate the negative behaviors within businesses that can disrupt valuable innovation. Understanding the principle that people cannot be team oriented, creative, or innovative when working in isolation, as certain social or interpersonal skills cannot be developed in order to interact effectively in a society (Reeder & Matos 2024).

Compassion is necessary to make people culturally aware (Martin, 2023) as it involves engaging of the neural systems that drive social affiliation, caregiving and motivate helping (Seppala et al., 2017). For Gallagher et al. (2024) Compassion deals with: a) recognition or awareness of suffering, b) feeling 'moved' for those who are suffering, c) appraisals of the situation of the other person and one's own ability to respond and tolerate distress, d) being motivated to act, or acting to alleviate the suffering, and e) activation of neural systems that drive such motivations and actions.

What is an Interculturally Competent person like?

The University of Jyväskylä (2014) defines this characteristic as a person who can demonstrate these main attributes or abilities:

- a) To communicate with people gaining their respect and trust, encouraging a cooperative and productive workplace that leads to professional achievements or assignment goals.
- b) To adapt one's professional skills to fit local conditions and constraints.
- c) To adjust personally and generally be content and at ease in a host culture.

Framework

The following framework was considered based on the premise that these are the existing categories of Intercultural Competence:

Table 3: Operativity of the concept Intercultural Competence

| Concept | Category | Elements |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Intercultural competence | Attitudes | Respect, Openness, Curiosity & discovery |
| | Knowledge & Comprehension | Cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness. |
| | Skills | To listen, observe, evaluate, analyze, interpret, and relate. |

METHOD

The objective of this study was to explore which students' intercultural competence skills can be developed through compassion during a Virtual Exchange Program. The research question was: What intercultural competence skills can be developed through compassion during a Virtual Exchange Program? The ethnographic research was implemented as it is a qualitative method used for collecting information through observation. For this study, the participant observation technique was selected, and the degree of participation was moderate as the observer is part of the group with an indirect participation (Spradley, 1980). According to Spradley it is used to study and understand people within their natural environment or culture where the observer is also a participant. This role was decided as it is the most ethical approach because the observer's activities are known to the group being studied (Gold, 1958). The research was conducted according to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008) whose guidelines for ethnographic fieldwork state the following:

“-Collect a variety of information from different perspectives and different sources.

Use observation, and site documentation, as well as audio-visual materials such as recordings and photographs.

-Write field notes that are descriptive and rich in detail.

Represent participants in their own terms by using quotations and short stories to capture their own experiences in their own words” (p. 156).

The information was analyzed based on two qualitative techniques discourse analysis and narrative analysis:

-Discourse analysis: A method for analyzing language within its social context, such as oral or written conversations or speeches. For Snape & Spencer (2003) examines the way knowledge is produced within different discourses and performances.

-Narrative analysis: A method for interpreting research participants' stories (Kohler, 1993), such as forum participations, texts or visual materials.

Information Collection

The participant observation was carried out from February to May 2024 via Google Classroom educative platform and Flipgrid video response App, as a parallel course for the Business Culture subject with a group of Marketing Students enrolled in the state university of Tabasco, Mexico, which is a public Higher Education Institution dealing with budgetary problems for financing mobility programs. This group was integrated by students from the economic administrative area from their institutions: 11 students from Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco [UJAT], 10 participants registered from Patras University located in Greece and eight students registered from Setsunan University based in Japan.

The activities for the program consisted in doing guided readings per week as a based literature. After the readings, students were expected to answer a series of questions as a paragraph for the Forum Activity. To provide a videorecorded message in the Flipgrid class, and other types of activities such as: mind map, a picture, a song, a series or movies suggestions related to the indicated topic of the week. The reading materials were oriented towards the development of Intercultural Competence through Compassion, and the information was analyzed and described into the following categories: Attitudes, Knowledge, and Skills of the Intercultural Competence Model by Deardoff (2006).

Few participants concluded the totality of the activities from the program, being eight from Mexico, four male and four female, and two from Greece, both female students. At the end of the program participants received a Certificate of Completion and, a Certification of Intercultural Competence Introductory Level. A ceremony was conducted and streamed by UJAT as a way of motivating others to become part of this type of initiatives.

Information Analysis

The analysis of the information was carried out with selective coding, as this allows to choose the core category and the integration of other categories around it, which may lead to developing theory from the information collected and constructing a new comprehensive theoretical framework. The coding used for participants was I for informant and a number, e. g. I5.

FINDINGS

The findings show that participants of the IVE developed the attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity and discovery. They were open to the different activities or interactions to be held during the program. They had already read about Japanese and Greek intercultural interactions, therefore, they tried to avoid uncomfortable topics, vocabulary, or comments that may have hurt the other person's feelings.

They also understood that there is no superior culture, despite what they have read about how accomplished Japanese people are and other attributes from specific personalities. As for the Greek culture, it was also difficult not feel overwhelmed since history has taught them that every famous philosopher was Greek, the idea of elevating topics for conversation, as well as advanced vocabulary, it all induced certain pressure on participants.

I1 “I have always considered those cultures as examples to follow, for what is shown on TV, anime, or series. But once, you get in touch or interact with them, you realize as Yokoi Kenji says it is a stereotype, not all Japanese know karate, and not all Latin Americans ride horses and wear ponchos”.

I3 “Encountering another culture as the Greek one that all I know is from the history books and their famous philosophers, therefore it is not familiar to me may perhaps be a little strange and overwhelming since the only culture I master is my own, although I remain amazed, excited, and attentive to learn more details, particularly with the level of the language or vocabulary”.

I5 “When a culture is unfamiliar to me, I take the opportunity to learn and grow, instead of judging or making assumptions. I learn and appreciate diversity in all its forms”.

I8 “In Mexico City I had the opportunity to witness cultural diversity in terms of religion or beliefs. It seemed strange to me to see Aztec dancers also known as *concheros* or group of dancers, doing a ritual to honor the Gods and establish a link with the Cosmos, playing their musical instruments, such as an armadillo shell mandolin. Dressed in huipils, adornments on their skin, as well as painted designs all over their body. It was impressive to see”.

The moment participants started commenting in the forums, sharing their video responses, they felt curious to see the others were just like them, university students sharing similarities in music, topics of interests, or the struggle with the language. They also discovered that some of their international peers were shy about being in front of a camera, showing their surroundings, of their English pronunciation or grammar mistakes they could make in that language. The international peers expressed in their video responses that this was their first IVE and were excited about it, felt some pressure because of the duration of the program and tried to meet the deadlines for activities, as well as with classes and activities at their universities (See Figure 1).

As for Compassion as the means for developing Intercultural Competence, it allowed participants to understand others' fears and concerns, dealing with these feelings, and being in the other person's situation when interacting with people from other cultures. Another element to highlight is how they tried to help themselves relax and soothe themselves, by providing suggestions, ideas or exercises to achieve it. In order to live in the present moment, rediscovering their values, and using coping thoughts. The elements detected as part of the core category Compassion are empathy, sympathy, and tolerance distress.

- Empathy: Understanding someone's feelings as if they were your own.
- Sympathy: Feeling sorry for someone, and offer advice not solicited.
- Distress tolerance: Managing actual or perceived emotional distress, surviving crises, and, accepting life as it is (See Figure 2).

One motivating factor for participating in this IVE detected in participants was that it was an additional activity to the subject Business Culture, which provided them with a scenario for practicing a second language, but also for putting into practice the knowledge acquired about interacting with people from other cultures. The second one was the recognition for the completion of the IVE, the Certification diploma the feedback received in every assignment, and the interactions they had with their international peers. The third one was the formal event to be held with authorities from the university, the official pictures, and the broadcasting or informative note on the news about the program, the participants, and the international recognition obtained (See Figure 3).

The image of the faculty can be estimated by students, school administrators, and colleagues when these types of initiatives are carried out in order to Internationalize the Curriculum, using an educational platform with dynamic and relevant activities that will become relevant components in students' formative education.

I2 "I have never had a subject where the professor offers an additional activity or extracurricular activity in my seven semesters, but mostly the level of competence and commitment to put together a program, with participants, just to provide a virtual space for students to practice another language, to learn more about intercultural competence, and teach additionally about educational platforms other than the institutional one".

I4 "I have heard about these programs only in American or Canadian universities, but never in my institution or in our school. As future marketers it is imperative to have these experiences to understand how to cope or deal with intercultural differences I never imagined could occur if not informed or formed".

I6 "I never expected the professor to gather the rector, the finance secretary, the Computing Centre Director, the University TV and Radio for a formal event, to receive a framed diploma, to be in front of a camera and all the community to see me there, my parents, relatives, and friends will be very proud when they see me there, I can't wait to complete the program".

The participants can invite other peers from the institution to register to another IVE when another program opens, they consider it will help others improve their level and domain of a second language, it will also help them understand another culture and how to interact with people from another place of origin.

They also appreciate that this type of initiatives was implemented half way of their career and not at the end practically when they are about to graduate, because it provided them with a new vision of the world, of the importance of connecting with others, and learn about personal and professional aspects of a target culture so intercultural differences are avoided, but in case they happen, one can be prepared to deal with those situations and effectively interact in this globalized world with the skills acquired from their program.

DISCUSSION

It is relevant to mention this is the first time this type of program has been implemented in that university, the rector was glad to see students were willing to do a maximum effort for improving the domain of a second language, to provide additional time for extracurricular activities, to be open to interact with people from other cultures, and to become promoters of this type of initiatives in a moment of budgetary cuts, and other limitations related to mobility.

This group of students understood the urgency for intercultural interaction in a such a changing laboral world, and that they will be competing not only with classmates from their school but with others with similar characteristics, and who are doing similar efforts to thrive as future professionals. They also showed concerned when grasping the idea that speaking English as a second language is not a synonym for success, as intercultural interactions demand specific skills for avoiding shock or a difference, and those who have had more experiences in this matter, are the ones who will be more likely to succeed.

Internationalization of the Curriculum is still a work in progress which can be developed if suggestions are followed, and the technological aids are included in the process particularly when there is no budget for mobility or no possibilities for traveling. Understanding the benefits involved since planning to executing an International Virtual Exchange, helps redefine and renew the way students interact with their international peers.

The attitudes students acquired from the formal or informal curriculum, will create the foundations for their international connections and future work partners. These attitudes may provide them with a competitive profile to insert themselves in any inter or multicultural teamwork, as they understand that there are different perspectives to solve problems, therefore, obtain different and effective results, to avoid being disregarded because of their cultural backgrounds, and moreover to avoid intercultural differences.

Compassion as the means to develop these attitudes, made them realize working alone cannot lead to be an effective member of the society. But working with others involves dealing with people's concerns, sufferings, fears, and feelings confirming what Gallagher et al. (2024) had stated. Emotions if not handled carefully should lead to a negative interaction and as a result, into an intercultural difference thus suggested by Martin (2023); compassion makes people culturally aware, so this is the appropriate entry to a person's mind to developing intercultural competence. As presented in the findings, the core

category as a preliminary new addition to the Intercultural Competence Model is Compassion with three elements: empathy, sympathy, and distress tolerance.

It is relevant to highlight the motivating factors in the Mexican culture, the first is to be praised as a way of motivating or encouraging people to participate in different initiatives, especially when there is no payment or monetary reward involved. So, the idea of receiving a document that can validate professional skills, or certifications that will be of great aid when applying for a job, is the appropriate condition to engage people to actively participate and go through a program like the one described in this paper. Public recognition would be the second motivating factor for actively participating and completing any program or initiative people are invited to collaborate, and lastly, if these efforts are shared with the rest of the community as role models, so others can have the same opportunities.

Being interculturally competent is not only holding a certificate, it involves doing instead of saying, leading by example so others can learn. Professors who are willing to plan and execute a similar IVE program must have in mind inviting other faculty who also demonstrate intercultural competence, those who are committed in investing additional hours for the design, material selection, follow-up of activities, giving individual feedback, to promote collaboration, foster the development of intercultural competence, and to form the next generation of professionals who will effectively perform in the laboral market as a global citizen.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1
Students' participations on Google Classroom and Flipgrid platforms



Figure 2
New Core Category Compassion and its elements



Figure 3
Certification event with institutional authorities



Note: *Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco*. (2024, May 29). Alumnos de Mercadotecnia de la UJAT concluyen con éxito su participación en el Virtual Exchange Program [Photograph]. UJAT.

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