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PLENARY SPEECH

Issues of equity and inclusion in Virtual Exchange

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Abstract

The increasing recognition of the limitations of physical mobility programs has led Foreign Language departments to consider online approaches such as Virtual Exchange (VE) and Blended Mobility as alternatives in international education. These online approaches have the potential to promote inclusion and diversity by providing opportunities for student cohorts who are unable to participate in traditional mobility programs. However, there are still challenges and barriers that need to be addressed, related to foreign language competence, digitalization, and structural gaps in educational systems. In this paper, I review the arguments and the evidence for and against the belief that VE can be a force for greater inclusion in international learning, before going on to explore the issue of equity of engagement in VE projects.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the opportunity to spend an extended period of time in the target culture has been considered a key element of foreign language learning in higher education contexts (Kinginger, 2009; Richardson, 2016). Jackson (2020) explains that for many years "it was widely assumed that formal L2 learning and immersion in the native speech community offer the best opportunity to enhance intercultural sensitivity and proficiency in the host language" (p. 445).

Despite this belief, the actual number of students who are able to participate in study abroad programs has remained steadily low. In the European Union, where the Erasmus+ program is considered one of the success stories of European integration, in 2018, only 13.5% of higher education graduates had taken part in some kind of student mobility program (European Commission, 2020). In the United States, a mere 1.9% of undergraduate students had studied abroad (Open Doors, 2021) and UNESCO report that currently only 2.6% of the total world population is internationally mobile (Sabzalieva et al., 2022).

In any case, commentators have been critical of the assumption that simply spending time in the foreign culture will lead to increased foreign language competence and intercultural awareness. Research has shown that the success of study abroad not only depends on the characteristics of learners (e.g. their openness to new experiences, motivation, etc.), but also on the experiences they actually have in the host country and how well they are prepared for the whole experience (Jackson, 2020). Paige et al. (2009) argue that it is the quality of the study abroad program and the depth of students' cultural and learning experiences that are key to successful intercultural learning.

Furthermore, proponents of Internationalization at Home initiatives have highlighted the exclusive nature of student mobility. Essentially, they argue that the financial costs of engaging in student mobility programs makes it an inherently elitist activity that is beyond the means of many students from low-income backgrounds (Brewer & Leask, 2022; Rumbley et al., 2022). Richardson (2016),

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for example, points out that "[m]obility tends to be socially exclusive, providing opportunities to elite students to enhance their distinctiveness from other students, but remaining inaccessible to many" (p. 53).

It is against this backdrop that online approaches to international learning have gained increased attention in recent years. An increasing awareness of the elitist nature of physical mobility, combined with the impossibility of physical mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic, drove many foreign language departments to consider how students could be engaged in online intercultural and language learning experiences as part of their studies.

These online approaches have come in the form of Virtual Exchange (VE) and, more recently, Blended Mobility. VE is an umbrella term to describe the different ways that learners are engaged in sustained online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work and under the guidance of educators. Blended Mobility refers to the strategic combination of both physical mobility and structured online collaboration in educational contexts (O'Dowd, 2023).

Different models of VE such as telecollaboration and e-tandem have been in use in foreign language education for over 20 years (see O'Dowd & Dooly Owenby, 2020 for an overview), but recent years have seen the emergence not only of organizations to support the activity (e.g. UNICollaboration), but also a considerable amount of funding from organizations such as the European Commission, the Stevens initiative, as well as the Dutch and German governments for projects dedicated to evaluating and promoting VE in foreign language and other subject areas (Helm et al., 2023; O'Dowd, 2023).

One of the main arguments in favor of promoting VE in educational contexts is that it is inherently more inclusive and more accessible to diverse learner cohorts than physical mobility programs. The European Commission's new Erasmus+ program (2021) calls on organizations who manage international projects and activities to take on a more "inclusive approach, making them accessible to a diverse range of participants" (p. 7). Virtual approaches to international education are seen to be key to achieving this. In relation to Blended Mobility, for example, the Commission claim, "[a]t its core, blended mobility creates new learning opportunities for people who could not participate in a mobility program before, in particular, students from different backgrounds, including those with fewer opportunities" (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022, p. 6).

It has been argued that VE can promote diversity and inclusion in many different ways. For example, not only can it be a tool for inclusion for student groups who are not traditionally able to take part in physical mobility programs for economic reasons, but it can also be a support for both learners and teachers who are working in contexts of isolation. VE can also function as a "safe place" for foreign language learners who are taking their first steps in using the foreign language with members of other cultures. Finally, VE can also open our classrooms to cultures or geographical regions that would not be easily accessible with physical mobility for financial or safety reasons.

However, I would argue that the assumption that virtual approaches such as VE and Blended Mobility will facilitate an inclusive approach to international foreign language education is, for the most part, just that – an assumption, and there are many counterarguments that would suggest that these online approaches can exclude students from a successful international learning experience in many ways as well. Furthermore, it is also important to be aware that inclusion and diversity in VE should not only involve getting students from diverse and marginal backgrounds to take part in these projects, but should also consider how their cultures and backgrounds are represented in the projects and to what extent they are able to engage as equals in their online interactions.

With this in mind, in this paper I review some of the main arguments and evidence for and against the belief that VE can be a force for greater inclusion in international learning, before going on to explore the issue of equity of engagement in VE projects. While the paper concludes with some proposals about how educators can endeavor to take a more inclusive approach in their VE projects, the reader is encouraged to keep in mind that the engagement of learners in authentic interaction with

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partners around the world is a complex activity and my goal here is primarily to raise awareness of the challenges and questions involved rather than offering simplistic answers.

2. Virtual Exchange as a tool for inclusion in international education?

The first argument to be considered in relation to inclusion in VE is perhaps the most common one: Does VE include cohorts of students who would not normally be able to take part in physical mobility programs?

Sabzalieva et al. (2022), in their large-scale study for the UNESCO on virtual approaches to international education, certainly believe so. They argue that virtual approaches have "excellent potential to open access and opportunities to students who would otherwise be unwilling or unable to travel due to physical, social, or financial reasons" (p. 15). The authors see these groups as including disabled students, migrant and refugee students, students with limited financial means, part-time students, and students who also work or have caring responsibilities. They also point out that virtual approaches provide a much more environmentally sustainable approach to international learning than physical mobility programs and they report on research that shows the emissions from international student mobility in higher education to be at least 14 megatons of carbon dioxide (CO2) per year (p. 15).

These arguments are supported by the Stevens Initiative. In their VE Impact and Learning Report (2023), they state:

> Many in the VE field point out that common barriers to participating in traditional mobility (in-person exchange) programs are not present in VE: high cost, access to visas, time away from family or work commitments, interruptions to courses of study, among others. (p. 6)

The organization's surveys on VE practices present compelling evidence that their supported programs consistently attract a significant proportion of participants who belong to marginalized identities and communities within the realm of international education. To illustrate, during the years 2021 and 2022, more than half of the U.S. participants in their VE programs self-identified as a race or ethnicity other than white. Furthermore, 11% of respondents in the fall of 2021 and 9% of respondents in the spring of 2022 acknowledged having a disability. Additionally, over 30% of all participants reported having a parent whose highest level of educational achievement did not surpass a bachelor's degree, a commonly used indicator of socioeconomic status referred to as "first-generation" students.

Likewise, Stevens' findings indicate that in the case of participants from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, 27% of respondents identified their parent's highest educational attainment as below a bachelor's degree. Moreover, 67% of respondents reported either currently attending or having attended a non-private secondary school that follows a domestic curriculum, which serves as an indicator of socioeconomic status within the MENA region.

Other studies have shown how VE can also serve to include cohorts of both foreign language students and teachers who reported themselves to be studying or working in contexts of isolation and who do not have easy access to physical mobility programs for training or education. For example, the Erasmus+ European Policy Experiment project VALIANT developed a program of *Virtual Innovation and Support Networks* that were defined as VE programs that bring together in-service school teachers, student teachers, and experts in facilitated online collaboration around real-world educational issues. In the study of almost 700 participants who took part in 24 of these VEs, participants were asked if the VE had impacted on their sense of professional isolation. Significant numbers reported feeling less isolated professionally and feeling that they belonged to a professional global network of educators (see Figure 1).

In their open questions, some language teachers explained how participation in structured online interaction had helped them overcome their sense of professional isolation:

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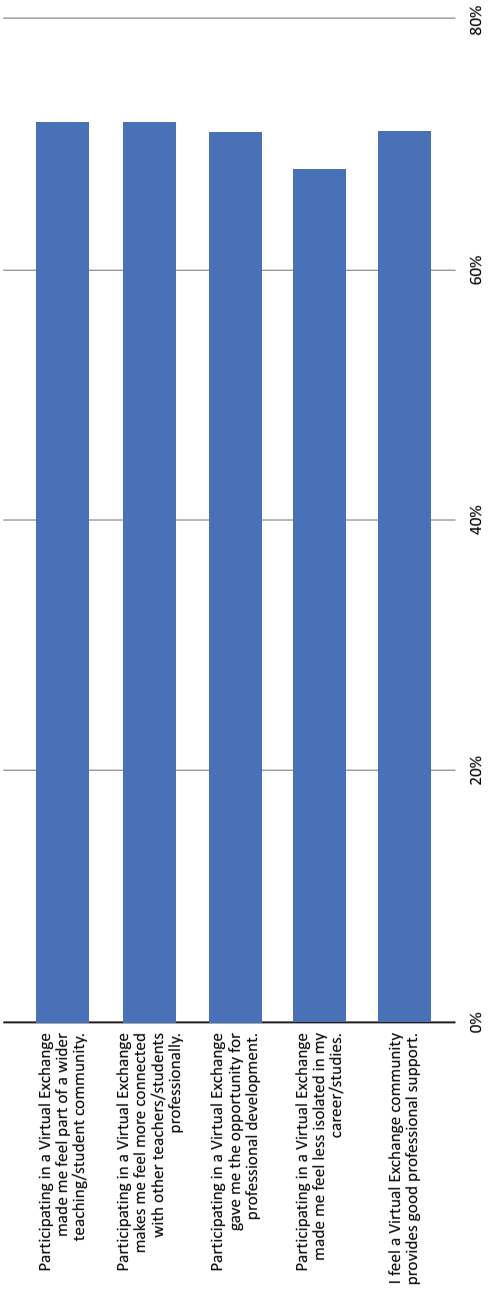


Figure 1. Impact of Virtual Exchange on professional isolation

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> Yes, sharing experience has helped ease the feeling of isolation. I would like to expand collaboration with some teachers from the group.
>
> I feel I am not lonely anymore. Before, I sometimes felt confused because I had nobody to discuss my work. Now, since I have met many friends through this project, I got a lot of inspiration.
>
> As a result of this VE, I've realized how important it is to collaborate and connect with other teachers, so I intend to incorporate it into my life.

However, while this research from the Steven's Initiative and the VALIANT project may seem to suggest that VE can provide international learning experiences to many groups that may not be able to benefit from physical mobility programs, there is also evidence to suggest that there are also barriers to accessing VE as a learning tool. Stallivieri (2020), for example, in her article about the challenges to the introduction of VE in Brazilian higher education, argues that in order for students to have effective access to this learning activity, it is first of all necessary for institutions to overcome three "gaps". The first of these is the linguistic gap as most Brazilians are not comfortable communicating in foreign languages. The second of these is the digitalization gap due to lack of access to technology and bandwidth, and the third is the structural gap that refers to lack of institutional and curricular flexibility and support for such initiatives.

In other words, it is important to consider that not all countries or educational systems are operating in sociocultural contexts that are suited for the uptake of the activity. In order for students and teachers to benefit from VE, the activity requires participants to have good internet access and a certain degree of communicative competence in the language of communication, as well as an educational system that will permit the integration of the activity into curricula and programs of professional development.

The question of internet access is one that appears regularly in the debate about VE. But this is not only limited to issues of bandwidth in certain countries, but also in regard to the extensive use of videoconferencing technology in online intercultural interaction. Over the past number of years, the use of synchronous video-based communication has become an integral part of most VE programs. While this has helped to make interaction more authentic and personalized, it has also raised issues of how students can integrate videoconferencing conversations into their daily lives. An interesting blogpost by Bali and Meier (2014) points out that videoconferencing meetings are incompatible with certain time zones and national holidays and are biased against people with families and busy lives outside of the classroom. They also give an advantage in the interactions to native speakers or advanced learners of the language of communication and demand high levels of bandwidth that may not be available to all users.

For these reasons, it is also important for VE practitioners to incorporate asynchronous, text-based communication in their exchanges in order to ensure an inclusive approach that caters for students who may not have access to the technology or the physical spaces required for successful videoconferencing meetings. Text-based asynchronous interaction allows those that may not be comfortable communicating in the language of the exchange time to prepare their messages and ideas, to review their language, and to check their ideas with local partners and their teacher before sending them to their international team. Text-based discussions are also documented so students and instructors can always view, evaluate, and build on all contributions. Finally, they support shy learners and those with difficulties using their microphone and camera.

3. Virtual Exchange as a safe space for foreign language learners?

One of the commonly mentioned advantages of VE in foreign language education is that it offers students a "first step" into using a foreign language with members of other cultures (EVALUATE, 2019). VE enables language learners the chance to have a structured engagement in the foreign language with members of other language communities with the support of their teachers. For many students, this is

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the first time that they will use the foreign language with someone outside of their own language classroom and, as such, this provides them with valuable preparation for more complex communicative situations when they travel to other countries. Interviews with students who had taken part in the VALIANT project clearly show the benefits of VE for language learners who are not used to engaging with others in the foreign language:

> It's been a great experience that has made me more confident about interacting with people from abroad.
>
> I can say that it helps me to practise the speaking skill. I have social phobia and I get nervous when talking to a group. The project helps me to overcome it.
>
> It enhanced my confidence. Because I was really embarrassed to speak in front of so many people but this exchange help me to get over my social anxiety.

However, again there is evidence that VE may not be a panacea for all foreign language learners. O'Dowd and Beelen (2021), for example, remind us that VE is based on the principle of collaborative learning that may not be suited to all students and that teachers may not be familiar with: "[T]here are various other exclusion mechanisms that can play a role in online collaboration, such as pedagogies and forms of assessment that favour some students over others" (n.p.).

There is also the issue of whether VE may put students into communicative situations that they are not comfortable with or that are beyond their current level of competence. While teachers work hard to design VE tasks that reflect the language levels of their students, it is sometime inevitable that students will find themselves struggling to communicate successfully in their international working groups. The following comment comes from a Spanish student who felt overwhelmed by the challenge of collaborating in videoconferencing sessions with international partners who she considered to be more proficient in English than she was:

> During this meeting I had some trouble communicating, as I am not used to speaking English. But I tried to do my best. However, when I saw the excellent level of English that the other students had, I felt insecure and didn't speak too much. I also had a lot of trouble understanding them, as they spoke very fast and had very thick accents.

While it is natural for researchers and teachers to focus on examples of VE that pushed students out of their communicative "comfort zones" (EVALUATE, 2019) and helped them to realize their capabilities for using their foreign language, it is also important to be aware of the negative impact on confidence and motivation that an unsuccessful VE experience can have on students. The careful scaffolding of tasks and effective group formation strategies are key to ensure that learners are not overwhelmed in their online intercultural interactions.

4. Can Virtual Exchange open our classrooms to cultures and regions not accessible through physical mobility?

A common critique of traditional study abroad programs is that they tend to focus on the same destinations. In Europe, for instance, both Ireland and the United Kingdom have benefitted economically from the huge influx of international students travelling to study and to learn English in countries where it is spoken as a first language. It is only in recent years, with the rise of English Medium Instruction programs, that other European countries have gained popularity as destinations for international study. Apart from issues of language, very often the destination for study abroad is chosen for reasons of practicality, with both course coordinators and students preferring countries that are easier or cheaper to travel to.

However, the emergence of VE has meant that students now have an opportunity to engage in contact with partners from countries that they would normally never consider for periods of physical mobility. Torres and Statti (2022) observe that "with the advent of newer technologies, locations

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for international focus are unbounded, allowing for visits to places otherwise not practical for university planning" (p. 24).

The opportunities that VE offers in this respect is evident in many of the programs that are financed by international organizations. The Stevens Initiative, for example, focuses on promoting VE programs between the USA and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries. Their website explains that "[e]xchange opportunities between the United States and the Middle East and North Africa are particularly limited. There is a need in both the United States and the Middle East and North Africa for opportunities for young people who wish but are unable to study abroad" (2023, n.p.).

Similarly, the European Commission has increasingly used VE as a tool to engage European students with "third countries" outside of the European Union. In recent calls for VE projects, particular emphasis was given to Sub-Saharan Africa, for example (see https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/virtual-exchanges).

But numerous questions related to the purpose and intended outcomes arise when VE is employed in this manner. What are the motives for offering VE programs and not physical mobility? Is this due to reasons of cost and safety? Or are institutions in the Global North promoting online interaction with certain nations and regions in order to reduce or avoid incoming physical mobility from these countries? And can online intercultural exchange lead to any real change or improvement in the political or economic situation of disadvantaged countries? Or does this risk simply being a form of educational voyeurism – allowing students in the Global North to have first-hand experiences of poverty, war, or other political regimes from the safe distance of their classrooms and sitting rooms?

Practitioners have offered different answers to these questions. Dietrich (2022), for example, engaged graduate students in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) with adult learners of English in Afghanistan for synchronous online tutoring sessions. She clearly saw a value for the partnership and concluded that:

> . . . through VE with participants in conflict countries, future teachers can gain invaluable professional experience needed to support students who live in places where they do not feel safe, students who have been forced to leave their homes, and students who have witnessed or experienced violence themselves. (p. 23)

Guariento (2023), on the other hand, is more sceptical. He reports on the English for Academic Studies Telecollaboration (EAST) project, which brought together engineering students in Scotland to work together with Palestinian engineering students in order to find technological answers to societal problems in the Gaza Strip. Unlike others working with similar partnerships, the author takes a more critical approach to the value and impact of VE that brings students from the Global North into contact with partners in economic and politically unstable contexts. He reports on reflections by participants that suggest that initiatives such as this may be "tokenistic" (p. 107) and he warns that "the emancipatory effects of online interaction should not be overstated (particularly in the Gaza Strip)" (p. 110). Nevertheless, he concludes that "[i]t is a pity (to put it mildly) that greater benefits do not accrue to the Global South students, but this does not in itself invalidate the project nor the concept of North-South pre-sessional project-work" (p. 110).

5. Can Virtual Exchange motivate students to engage in physical mobility?

A final issue to consider is whether VE can contribute to a more inclusive approach to international education by encouraging more students to become involved in physical mobility programs. Quite simply, the argument here is that VE and Blended Mobility can awaken students' interest in international learning, help them to overcome their initial fears of intercultural contact, and motivate them to take part in long-term study abroad programs.

A large-scale study by Lee et al. (2021) would appear to confirm that this is indeed the case. The researchers followed 39,381 students through their entire academic career at a large American

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university in order to identify the impact of participation in VE on the probability of subsequent study abroad. They report that:

> . . . our results show that students who have taken an IVE [International VE] course are roughly twice as likely to subsequently study abroad as those who do not take such courses. Evaluated at the sample means, the probability of studying abroad goes up from 6.4% to 14.1%, after the IVE "treatment" compared to demographically similar students who do not receive such "treatment". (p. 16)

These results are confirmed in the initial findings of a study being carried out in the Netherlands. The program "Virtual International Collaboration in Higher Education" is financed by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and helps lecturers set up or improve VE projects (https://visinhetho.nl/). Besides financial support through the grant, support is also offered in the form of advice and training. The research study that is evaluating the impact of VE on students found that over 60% of students strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement "Following my VE, I am now more interested in taking part in a physical international exchange than before" (see Figure 2).

Of course, the relationship between participating in a VE and later taking part in a long-term period of physical mobility is not straightforward. Lee et al. (2021) also recognize there is a risk that students may view VE as a way of "ticking the box" of their international learning experience and therefore not feel the need to engage in other international activities. Furthermore, proponents of physical mobility programs warn that institutions may use the numbers of students participating in online intercultural initiatives as an excuse to reduce funding for physical mobility. In the joint position paper by the European Students' Union and the Erasmus Student Network (2022), the authors warn that virtual initiatives should not be confused with physical mobility:

> Virtual learning and thus VEs cannot substitute face-to-face interaction and physical mobility that imply cultural immersion and first-hand experience of the everyday life of the host culture, despite its great potential and capacity to stimulate social interactions and develop key competences. (p. 2)

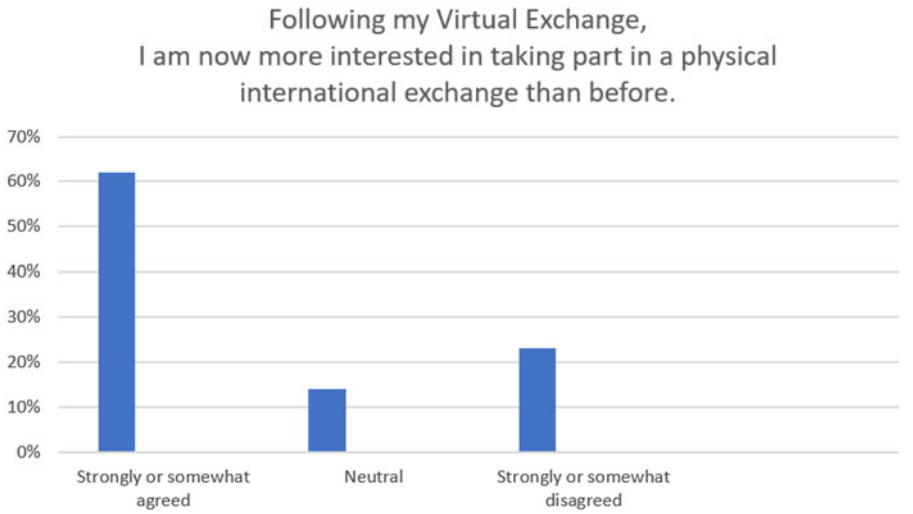


Figure 2. Virtual Exchange as a motivation to engage in physical mobility programs

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Then, they go on to state:

> Virtual learning is to be seen as an add-on to physical mobility, complementing it instead of replacing it. Therefore, when counting participants in international mobility, participants in virtual activities should not be counted as "mobile students" but as another category, and funding for these activities should not be taken from the budgets for student mobility. (p. 3)

I would agree with them that VE is not a replacement for study abroad programs and we should avoid situations where both activities are seen as competing for the same sources of funding. Instead, VE can complement physical mobility programs, it can be combined with physical mobility (in the form of Blended Mobility or Pre-Mobility programs), and we have seen that there is also evidence that it can promote later participation in physical mobility programs. There is clearly no reason why these two different activities cannot be used together effectively in universities' internationalization programs. In this sense, discourses that seek to highlight the value of one activity over the other are not helpful.

6. Addressing issues of equity in the design of Virtual Exchange

We have seen until now issues related to VE's potential to include and exclude learners when it is employed in foreign language education. While it may be more accessible than physical mobility programs for many cohorts of learners, it can also have barriers to access due to issues of technological access and foreign language competence. There is also a risk that it could be used to limit physical mobility with certain regions or countries or that learners can use it as an excuse not to participate in physical mobility programs.

But it is also important to consider the issues of inclusion and equality in VE through the lens of how students are engaged in contact together. By this I mean that there is a distinct danger that VE and Blended Mobility programs that bring together students from distinct cultural backgrounds may simply serve to inadvertently reproduce relationships of inequality, neo-colonialism, and cultural domination or to reinforce cultural or national stereotypes. DeWinter and Klamer (2021) are aware of this and warn that COIL – Collaborative Online International Learning (a well-known model of VE) – presents two notable contradictions to decolonized practice. These relate to the widespread use of English as a lingua franca in VE and, second, the fact that it is usually teachers from the Global North who provide training in online collaboration to their partners in the Global South.

Much has already been written about how the structure of international education programs and initiatives can reinforce negative images between the Global North and Global South. In relation to physical mobility programs, for example, Agreement et al. (2023) observe that "study abroad participants from the Global North often initially reflect an attitude of coming to help, instead of being more receptive to learning from their host communities" (p. 170), while Helm et al. (2023) state that:

> . . . [u]niversities have had limited success in promoting forms of global collaboration that are based on principles of reciprocity and mutual learning both between universities and also amongst students. Internationalization has been, for the most part, a form of neo-colonialism with universities in the "global north", predominantly those in Anglophone countries, drawing in students from the "global south" for the financial income they provide. (p. 2)

In the case of VE, equity depends greatly on how participants' nationalities are positioned in relation to their partners within the exchange and what tasks they are required to carry out together. A review of some examples of online projects can help us to see three key challenges involved in establishing balanced and equitable relationships in VE – especially when learners from the Global North are brought into contact with partners from the Global South or from contexts that may be considered economically, physically, or socially disadvantaged in comparison with their partners.

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The first of these challenges is that one of the partner classes and its culture may be treated or portrayed as an exotic learning opportunity or curiosity. For example, one short case study from the literature describes an American group of learners who exchanged emails with a group from Quebec for over a year and a half in order to carry out various tasks together. Each group was learning the other's language (English–French). The exchange is reported to have worked extremely well and the American group are said to have considered their Quebecois partners competent and highly proficient models for learning French. However, it was not until the two groups met at the end of the exchange that the American students were informed that their partner class actually consisted of deaf children.

It is questionable here if these classes were engaged in an equitable way in their online interactions together. The teachers undoubtedly meant well and intended to demonstrate to the American group that deaf children could be valuable partners, but one could also argue that there was a level of dishonesty underlying the exchange, and that for most of the project, students' prejudices and stereotypes had been avoided rather than confronted. Instead of encouraging the American group to accept their deaf partners as equals, the disability was used to teach them a lesson when the exchange had ended. The Quebec group was not treated as equal partners in the way the exchange was conceived, rather their disability was treated as an exotic learning opportunity for their partners.

A second challenge to equity in VE partnerships is that the partner class and culture is seen to be somehow "in trouble" and therefore needing to be "saved" by their partners. This can be seen, for example, in the following example where international teams of Palestinian and American engineering students worked together to solve sustainability challenges and to develop green building designs for a Palestinian Refugee Camp. The designs were judged by a panel of experts in a final competition. As a reward, Palestinian students from the winning teams travelled to the United States to meet their counterparts and learn about green building there.

Again, there is no question that the organizers of this exchange intended to depict the Palestinian group as inferior, but nevertheless, there is a danger that one country is seen as helping the other rather than both sets of students learning about problems and challenges in both countries – therefore reinforcing power relationships between both sets of students. The problem that needed to be solved was in one of the two partner countries and the prize for the best team was a trip to the other one. How can such relationships of inequality be challenged? Perhaps the problems that the teams worked on could have been located in a third country – or in both the partner countries? Perhaps American students might have also benefitted from winning a trip to Palestine?

Finally, the third challenge to equity in VE can often be seen, not in how an exchange is structured, but rather in the way students interact with their partners. In these cases, students may be considered by their partners to be "unaware of the reality" about an aspect of their home culture and that the students' role is to explain to them how they should understand the situation.

This is obvious in the following example where a student from Germany writes to his international partners in Israel. The students in Israel had just explained that their campus had been attacked by rockets and had told their German and Spanish partners about the fear they had experienced. The German student replied:

> . . . I can understand that the rockets [that were fired at your campus] are very scary and I'm very glad that we in Germany don't have war like you. And I think Israel isn't alone in charge for this conflict.
>
> But can you understand the people in Gaza? Is it ok to keep these people there like in prison? And why it isn't possible or why it's so complicated to find a solution for all the people in your region? And why the people especially the young don't do something for the international understanding between these cultures? So it's time so sit together, talk and finish this war. And both parties must grant facilities.

A second message from a student in the United States to her partner in Spain also reflects this attempted imposition of one person's set of beliefs on their partner:

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> How do people there feel about same-sex marriages raising children? Are the children being raised to believe this type of marriage is the norm? Do same-sex marriages in Spain have problems with roles, like in America? For example, who serves as the mother role and who serves as the father role model? At least in a single parent, a combined family or and adoptive family those role models are there and usually clear, whereas in same-sex partners they are not. Another question would be do these children grow up to enter into a same-sex marriage themselves.
>
> These are very hard questions to answer. America was based on the Bible, we open our Congress meetings with prayer, our money is imprinted with "In God We Trust" and laws are based on Bible beliefs. The Bible states homosexual ways are wrong. What are the beliefs in Spain?

In both cases, the students who had received the messages felt uncomfortable about responding and reported having the impression that even though the messages were couched in questions ("But can you understand the people in Gaza?" / "Do same-sex marriages in Spain have problems with roles, like in America?"), the authors had little interest in learning about alternative cultural perspectives and were instead more concerned about imposing their own views about the political or social questions under question.

These examples serve to illustrate the challenges to equity of engagement that can emerge in VE. While some of these challenges may be related to students' own intentions to impose their own cultural beliefs, in other cases it is the structure of the VE itself that can serve to reproduce unequal relationships between countries or social groups. Teachers can help to avoid this happening by taking care to design tasks and projects that do not involve one class "helping" or teaching the other, but rather involve students in engagement where both sides stand to benefit and learn from their partners. Providing opportunities for all partners to present and express their cultural and social background in a respectful environment is also key to success. Finally, helping students to develop an interest in alternative cultural perspectives and beliefs can also lead students to listen actively to their partners, instead of seeking to impose their own cultural viewpoint. Wimpenny et al. (2022), in their study of different VE programs that brought students from the Global North and Global South into contact together, argue that "values such as mutuality, inclusivity, equity (redress) and equality (equally valued) should guide all interactions in this space towards open and authentic interactions, promoting not only tolerance, but hospitality and appreciation" (p. 289).

An example of a VE project that reflects these principles is provided by Porto (2014). She reports on a potentially very sensitive VE between British and Argentinian students working together on the theme of the Falklands war in which both countries had fought against each other. Avoiding any possible discussions relating to the victor and vanquished, students from both countries collected interviews with veterans from both countries and produced documents and activities in their local communities aimed at supporting reconciliation between the two countries.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the increasing recognition of the limitations and exclusivity of physical mobility programs has led to the rise of online approaches such as VE and Blended Mobility as alternatives in international education. These online approaches have the potential to promote inclusion and diversity by providing opportunities for student cohorts who are unable to participate in traditional mobility programs. VE, in particular, offers access and opportunities to students who face physical, social, or financial barriers to travel. It also addresses concerns of sustainability by reducing carbon emissions associated with international student mobility. Additionally, VE serves as a safe space for foreign language learners, allowing them to gain confidence in using the target language in intercultural interactions. However, it is important to acknowledge that while VE has the potential to be inclusive, there are still challenges and barriers that need to be addressed, such as linguistic, digitalization, and structural gaps in educational systems. The design and scaffolding of VE tasks need to consider the diverse

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needs and language proficiency levels of participants to ensure successful and empowering experiences.

Furthermore, VE offers the opportunity to broaden the cultural horizons of students beyond the typical destinations of physical mobility programs. It can open classrooms to cultures and regions that may be inaccessible due to financial or safety reasons. By facilitating online interactions and collaborations, VE allows for cross-cultural dialogue and engagement with diverse perspectives. However, it is crucial to ensure that these interactions are conducted in a respectful and equitable manner, giving equal voice and representation to all participants. The use of translanguaging, for example – as proposed by Hauck (2023) – can contribute to a more balanced participation by students in their online interactions.

Other strategies to promote more balanced engagement in online intercultural interaction include promoting the use of asynchronous text-based interaction, positioning partner classes as equals – one culture should not be seen as "helping" or "teaching" the other – and discussing critical incidents in class with students, thereby raising awareness of how power is used through the strategic use of language (Gerlach, 2020). By taking steps such as these, educators can ensure that VE will foster a truly inclusive and enriching international learning experience for all participants.

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