

Student Perspectives of Global Citizenship within a Virtual Exchange

Gregory Weaver

University of Maryland, USA

*Corresponding author: gweaver@umd.edu

Abstract

Higher education internationalization has become an increasingly challenging endeavor. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and the ever-changing landscape of immigration policies have called for a need to reexamine how universities internationalize. Transnational virtual classrooms or virtual exchanges have been shown to provide students with a more equal opportunity to develop their global competencies and cultural skills than study abroad. Traditional internationalization methods may no longer be as effective as they have been in the past, creating a need to reconceptualize how we educate college students for global competencies. This research in-progress summarizes a portion of a dissertation. The aim of this qualitative study is to investigate global citizenship student awareness in a virtual exchange. This study presents preliminary findings of their experiences.

Keywords: global citizenship development, higher education internationalization, online learning, virtual exchange

Internationalization in higher education has traditionally consisted of student mobility through international enrollments and exchange programs, faculty-led short-term study abroad, international studies within curriculum, and global mission statements (Henson et al., 1991; Hser, 2005; Sandreen et al., 1999). Traditional internationalization methods may no longer be as effective as they have been in the past with barriers, such as COVID-19 (Martel & Goodman, 2021), changes in immigration regulations (NAFSA, 2021) and addressing equity and social composition amongst participants (Van Mol & Perez-Encinas, 2022). These barriers have led to a need to reconceptualize the internationalization of higher education on how educators develop college students' global competencies.

Transnational virtual exchanges provide students more equal opportunities to develop global competencies and cultural skills than study abroad (Custer et al., 2017). Virtual classrooms can operate cheaper and safer than traditional student mobility programs (Alami et al., 2022). The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of virtual classroom exchanges at an American public higher education institution for global citizenship development. It will examine college student experiences, and perceptions, within virtual exchanges.

Literature Review

Global Citizenship

Global citizenship is used when describing the outcome of international education, and it has been used to educate those as a preparation to work and operate in an ever-increasing globalized society (de Wit, 2016). It expands on the notions of global competence and intercultural competences, which develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values different cultural contexts, to “actively” participate in improving the global society (O’Dowd, 2019). UNESCO (2014) defines global citizen education as a way “to empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world” (p. 15).

A global citizen is a person aware of a wider world, respects and values diversity, shows a passion for social justice, takes ownership for their actions, collaborates with others to create a more equitable and sustainable world, and has an understanding on how the world works (Oxfam, 2015). The Oxfam components of Global Citizenship will serve as a theoretical construct for this research project. The key tenets of this framework consist of students utilizing critical thinking and asking questions that allow them to explore local-global connections, engage in the complexities of multiple perspectives social justice issues, the ability to have their voices heard through informed reflective action, and the ability to apply it all contextually towards real-world issues (Oxfam, 2015). The theoretical construct provides context during the observations and informs the interview portion of this research project.

Virtual Exchange

Virtual exchange develops intercultural competencies between students from across the globe in a virtual setting (O’Dowd, 2019). When dealing with student mobility issues due to COVID-19 (Martel & Goodman, 2022; NAFSA, 2021) the online space allows for global citizenship competencies development that would otherwise be nearly impossible. Virtual exchanges allow for student connections beyond great geographical voids (Dorroll et al., 2019). Virtual exchange can be defined as, extended online engagements of students in collaboration with partners from other geographical locations or cultural contexts as part of their education experiences with educators facilitating (O’Dowd, 2018, O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016).

Virtual exchanges provide comprehensive internationalization at home (Lee & Cai, 2019; Morris et al., 2018), by improving cross-cultural understanding (Caluinou, 2019), global skill competencies (Bassani & Bachem, 2019; Toner, 2018), and fostering equity for participants (Custer & Tuominen, 2017; de Witt, 2016; Elliott-Gower et al., 2015; Soliya, 2020). De Witt (2016) professes virtual intercultural exchanges as “a more inclusive, innovative approach to internationalization” (p. 76). One of the most important innovations of inclusive internationalization is the equity it can provide to marginalized participants compared to student mobility (Van Mol & Perez-Encinas, 2022). Virtual exchanges allow for greater mobility for students without the traditional expenses associated with students relocating to another country for their studies (Custer & Tuominen, 2017; de Witt, 2016; Elliott-Gower et al, 2015; Soliya, 2020). Lastly, virtual exchanges have been used as a facilitator towards global citizenship development within foreign language education in Europe (O’Dowd, 2020).

Research Method

This project utilizes a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2008). Case studies are essential in understanding human experiences (Abramson, 1992). As noted by Yin (2008) and Creswell (2013), case studies are bounded by a specific phenomenon. This case study is bounded at an institutional level of a public American University, asking; how do students perceive their participation in virtual exchange as a contribution to develop global citizenship competencies?

Positionality Statement

I am the observer within this study, serving as a co-instructor in an undergraduate virtual exchange from 2019-2021. I have been able to address my positionality with the student participants to gain access. This allows for insider access which can allow for greater trust and rapport with participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vicars, 2012).

Data Collection

This study utilizes purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009). Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews (Corbin et al. 2015), observations, and document analysis (McNamara, 2008). These forms of data collection allow for triangulation, increasing trustworthiness while addressing internal validity threats (Merriam, 2009). Data were collected between the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 academic-years at an American public university. Inclusion criteria for the study consisted of undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled or previously enrolled in a virtual exchange. The sample size for this study consisted of five students interviewed following their coursework, 13 student mini-autoethnographies

course assignments describing their virtual exchange experiences with context to course topics, and course observations. Interview participants consented to recorded virtual one-hour interviews. Local institutional review board approval was attained prior to data collection.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts, observation fieldnotes, and mini-autoethnographies were uploaded for analysis in NVivo. The data analysis process included de-identified interview data, interview memos, and course documents, allowing for engagement, analysis, and interpretation of the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Transcripts and fieldnotes were coded using initial coding in NVivo (Charmaz, 2006). Two approaches of analyzing within case data and searching for cross-case patterns were utilized (Eisenhardt, 1989). As patterns generated, categories were created; once multiple categories were created, analytical memos were used to make sense of how categories reflected a theme.

Member checks addressed internal validity threats (Cho & Trent, 2006) and took place at various stages of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing with committee members were utilized to help facilitate external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988).

Findings

The theme of virtual exchange as a channel for global citizenship development was generated from five interviews, observation field notes, and document analysis of autoethnographies.

Virtual Exchange as a Channel for Global Citizenship Development

Students' abilities to recognize virtual exchange as a way to internationalize higher education and support global citizenship development appeared through Dustin, a senior, who participated in a virtual exchange with an East Asian partner shared his views in his mini-autoethnography;

With the use of transnational virtual classes I believe without a doubt that [faculty] could revolutionize the way [students] interact with those from a different background. Through use of virtual classes like ours we allow students to experience interacting with others from across the globe they would never have been able to otherwise. In this controlled environment professors are able [to] guide the mentalities of the students and mold them to be readily open and accepting of diversity.

Miguel, a sophomore, who participated in a virtual exchange with an East Asian Country, stated in his mini-autoethnography; "[Virtual Exchanges] help us [as students] engage in meaningful discussions with classmates surrounding the world and will let us share our values and beliefs and through communication we can compare and contrast our views." Adam, a graduate student who participated in a virtual exchange with a Middle East Country shared his thoughts of virtual exchange allowing for more accessibility than a study abroad during his interview;

Thinking about an international perspective that it might not be offered as a study abroad, just be due to logistics or safety or language barriers. I think if you can fit more of those in [with virtual exchange], I think [virtual exchange] is more beneficial towards student global development.

The students' recognition of virtual exchanges as a channel for global citizenship development align with the Oxfam (2015) framework for global citizenship development. Such as, cross-cultural communication, understanding global-local issues, ability to contextually apply real world issues, and have the reflective space to understand them (Oxfam, 2015). The student virtual exchange experiences facilitated their global citizenship development.

Implications and Concluding Thoughts

While previous studies have explored student competencies within virtual exchanges, there have been few that have examined students' perceptions through self-reflection of virtual exchanges experiences utilizing autoethnography. This approach allowed for the students, as the authors of their individual autoethnographies, to contain their personal story with the context of the larger cultural meaning of global citizenship (Creswell, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a need for the reexamination of internationalization methods and global citizenship development within higher education. The preliminary findings of this study provide support for virtual exchange as a method for students to develop as global citizens in this setting. This study advances the field of comparative and international higher education with the students' revelations and perceptions on how virtual exchange can be used to internationalize and produce global citizens competencies from their point-of-view.

References

- Alami, N. H., Albuquerque, J., Ashton, L. S., Ewoodzie, K., Hauck, M., Karam, J., Klimanova, L., Nasr, R., & Satar, M. (2022). Marginalization and underrepresentation in virtual exchange: Reasons and remedies. *Journal of International Students*, 12(S3), 57-76.
- Abramson, P.R. (1992). *A case for case studies*. Sage.
- Bassani, P.S., & Buchem, I. (2019). Virtual exchanges in higher education: developing intercultural skills of students across borders through online collaboration. *RIITE*, 6, 22-26.
- Baez, B. (2002). Confidentiality in qualitative research: Reflections on secrets, power and agency. *Qualitative Research*, 2(1), 35-38.
- Caluianu, D. (2019). When more is less: unexpected challenges and benefits of telecollaboration. In A. Turua, M. & T. Lewis (Eds.). *Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship* (pp.7-13).
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cho, J., & Trent, A. (2006). Validity in qualitative research revisited. *Qualitative Research*, 6, 319-340.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Custer, L. & Tuominen, A. (2017). Bringing “internationalization at home” opportunities to community colleges: design and assessment of an online exchange activity between U.S. and Japanese students. *Teaching Sociology* 45(4), 347-357.
- de Wit, H. (2016). Internationalisation and the role of online intercultural exchange. In R. O’Dowd & T. Lewis (eds.), *Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy, practice*. Routledge: New York, 192–208.
- Dorroll, C., Hall, K., Blouke, C., & Witsell, E. (2019). Virtual Exchange Pedagogy: A Digital Humanities Approach. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 11(Spring), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v11i1Spring.925>
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building Theories from Case Study Research. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532–550. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258557>
- Elliott-Gower, S., & Hill, K.W. (2015). *The Soliya Connect Program: Two Institutions; Experience with Virtual Intercultural*. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4392&context=facpubs>
- Henson, J.B., Noel, J.C., Gillrad-Byers, T.E., & Ingle, M.D. (1991). *Internationalizing U.S. Universities: preliminary study of a national study*. Pullman, Washington: International Programs, Washington State University.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2006). *The practice of qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.
- Hser, M. P. (2005). Campus internationalization: A study of American universities’ internationalization efforts. *International Education*, 35(1), 35–48.
- Lee, B. K., & Cai, H. (2019). Evaluation of an Online “Internationalization at Home” Course on the Social Contexts of Addiction. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(3), 365–388. <https://doi-org.proxy.um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1177/1028315318797155>
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba. E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Martel, M., & Goodman, A. (2022). The Future of International Educational Exchange is Bright. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v14i2.4036>
- McNamara, C. (2008). *Basic guide to program evaluation*. Authenticity Consulting.
- Merriam, S.B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S.B., & Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. (4th Ed.) Wiley and Sons.
- Morris, W. A., Ringle, M. C., & East Carolina University. Department of Educational Leadership. (2018). *Building a global perspective at home: a study of the acquisition of a global perspective by students of global understanding* (dissertation). East Carolina University.
- NAFSA (2021). Restore, Grow, and Diversity U.S. Study Abroad Participation. Retrieved from <https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/media/document/issue-brief-support-programs-impacted-covid-19.pdf>
- O’Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: state-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration moving forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1, 1-23.
- O’Dowd, R. (2019). A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education. *Language Teaching*, 1-14.
- O’Dowd, R. (2020). A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education. *Language Teaching*, 53(4), 477-490. doi:10.1017/S0261444819000077
- O’Dowd, R., & Lewis, T. (Eds.). (2016). *Online intercultural exchange: Policy, pedagogy, practice*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Oxfam (2015) *Education for global citizenship: A guide for schools*. Oxford, UK: Oxfam.
- Sandgren, D., Elig, N., Hovde, P., Krejci, M., & Rice, M. (1999). How international experience affects teaching: Understanding the impact of faculty study abroad. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 3(1), 33–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/102831539900300104>
- Soliya (2020). Soliya Connect Program. Retrieved from <https://www.soliya.net/programs/connect-program>
- Toner, M. (2018). Global Connections, Staying Local: Online international education continues to grow as an alternative-- and support—to in-person study. *International Educator* (1059-4221), 27(2), 24–27.

- UNESCO (2014). *Global citizenship education: preparing learners for the challenges of the 21st century*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- Van Mol, C., & Perez-Encinas, A. (2022). Inclusive internationalisation: Do different (social) groups of students need different internationalisation activities? *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(12), 2523-2538.)
- Vicars, M. (2012). Toward a rhizomatic methodology: How queer! In S. Sternberg & G. Cannella (Eds.), *Critical qualitative research reader* (pp.468-478). Peter Lang.
- Yin, R. (2008). *Case study research: Design and Methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
-

Gregory C. Weaver is a PhD candidate in Higher Education, Student Affairs and International Education Policy at the University of Maryland. His research interests are in the internationalization of higher education, virtual exchange, and online learning.