Chapter Eight

Virtual Exchange for the Sake of Internationalisation at Home

Dorsaf Ben Malek
Virtual University of Tunis, Tunisia
dorsaf.benmalek@uvt.tn

Rut Muniz Calderón
Catholic University of Valencia, Spain
rut.muniz@ucv.es

Purpose The purpose of the current chapter is to shed light on the virtual exchange (VE) by enumerating its definitions, theoretical approaches, and scenarios, as well as its learning objectives, institutional outcomes, and implications for internationalisation at Home. Thus, our goal is to introduce scholars and educators to this brand new area of research and study and encourage them to set up their own VES in order to utilise them in the internationalisation of their students and institutions.

Study design/methodology/approach The structure of the current chapter is composed of three principal sections. The first relates to the theories that intervene to set up a VE, including the learning theories, the online teaching theories, and the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) theoretical models. The second section is dedicated to valorizing the roles of VE practitioners in the development of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The final section explains the relationship between VE and internationalisation at Home for higher education institutions (HEIS).

Findings Literature has demonstrated the correlation between the implementation of VE and the development of the learners' international identity and global mindset, which help them enhance their employability skills within a growing multicultural job market.

Originality/value The value of the current chapter lies in the different angles from which VE is presented to scholars and educators, namely its overlapping theories and scenarios. In fact, our ultimate goal is to raise their awareness of the necessity of implementing VE by bringing digital natives together in the same milieu of discussion and contributing to building their international experiences and future careers.

Introduction

In the previous chapters, the scholars tackled Internationalisation at Home from various angles, namely its theoretical framework and best practises, including the internationalisation of the curricula and extracurricular activities, the inclusion of on-campus intercultural activities, the mingling of international and local students, and the implementation of an overall strategic plan for Internationalisation at Home as an effective institutional approach. In the same philosophy, virtual exchange (VE) was also mentioned as an effective measure to implement the concept within HEIS. In fact, it is considered a wide-open window on the cultural diversity of the world. Local students are therefore not obliged to leave their home countries in order to dive into intercultural encounters that breed their intercultural awareness. Thus, the intent of the current chapter is to explore the definitions, theoretical approaches, and scenarios of VES, as well as their learning objectives and institutional outcomes, and ultimately demonstrate their implications for internationalisation at Home. Our goal is to introduce scholars and educators to this brand new area of research and study and encourage them to set up their own VES to utilise them in the internationalisation of their students and institutions.

Virtual Exchange Definitions, Theoretical Approaches, and Scenarios

Definitions and Appellations of Virtual Exchange

As defined by O'Dowd (2017), virtual exchange (VE), also called online collaborative learning, tele-collaboration, globally networked learning environments, collaborative online international learning (COIL), or online intercultural exchange, is the meaningful use of online tools to bring groups of learners 'geographically' distant into the same milieu of discussion, cultural exchange, and interaction for the purpose of enhancing their linguistic skills, intercultural communicative competence, and digital literacy skills. Therefore, it is a computer-mediated communication programme that was originally used in the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Nowadays, there are many other organisations worldwide that foster VE, such as The Stevens Initiative, a joint international effort to build global citizenship and professional skills for young people in the United States, the Middle East, and North Africa by promoting virtual exchange (Stevens' Initia-

tive, 2020). It has become widely used in various disciplines as an avenue to internationalise the curriculum. Indeed, according to Bassani & Buchem (2019), virtual exchange has been defined as a form of virtual mobility that intends to enlarge the sphere and scope of traditional intercultural learning programmes. In line with this, according to the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange brochure, virtual Exchange has been defined as a form of virtual mobility that, through the use of technologies, can bring an unprecedented number and diversity of people together in meaningful cross-cultural learning experiences (Angelini & Muñiz, 2021). With a broad reach within and far beyond Europe's borders, it can bridge more important cultural divides, giving young people exposure to a variety of different world views and beliefs (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, 2019).

The intrinsic collaborative, experiential, and cross-curricular learning that Virtual Exchange has proven to offer becomes an ideal tool to foster interaction between students and educators worldwide, as well as to promote the internationalisation of higher education not only in Europe but also among other continents (Angelini & Muñiz, 2021). Virtual Exchange is acquiring a more relevant position as an alternative methodological approach and as a form of inclusive mobility for students that are unable to participate in physical mobility programmes due to different reasons, such as high costs of travelling and living in a foreign country or socio-economic, health-related, or political issues (Buchem et al., 2018). Nevertheless, whether used in language learning or other disciplines, one or more tutors who, within this intercultural context, will play different roles and wear different hats for the smooth progress of the VE, should necessarily guide the communication that takes place in a VE among culturally diverse students.

Virtual Exchange Theoretical Approaches

Virtual exchange is the crossroad of different but interdependent research areas and theoretical frameworks, namely online teaching theories, teaching and learning approaches, and models of intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Learning Theories in Virtual Exchange

The learning theories that intervene in virtual exchange coincide with the teaching goals and learning objectives of the course studied. These are the traditionally known learning theories, namely:

- Behaviourism which examines the behaviour of learners while learning by constantly scrutinising them while performing some tasks.
- Cognitivism, in which the mind has an important role in learning by creating, evaluating, analysing, applying, understanding, and remembering according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy,
- Social constructivism, in which teaching and learning are complex interactive social phenomena between teachers and students. In this vein, John Dewey saw learning as a series of practical social experiences in which learners learn by doing, collaborating, and reflecting with others.

Online Teaching Theories

Several theories derive from the aforementioned learning theories to adapt to the online environment. They all converge on three principles: community-centeredness, knowledge-centeredness, learner-centeredness, and assessment-centeredness (Bransford et al., 1999). The following are the most renowned theories in relation to online teaching:

- Community of Inquiry (COI) by Garrison et al. (2000) was founded on the three distinct presences of cognitive, social, and teaching. The intersection of these three presences results in a learning experience (Figure 8.1). COI encourages the design of online and blended courses as dynamic learning milieus in which educators and learners share thoughts, knowledge, and opinions.
- Connectivism is 'a learning model that acknowledges major shifts in the way knowledge and information flow, grow, and change because of vast data communications networks' (Picciano, 2017, p. 174). According to Siemens (2004), connectivism relies on eight principles in online learning, namely:
  1. Diversity of opinions;
  2. Connecting specialised nodes or information sources;
  3. Non-human appliances;
  4. The capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known;
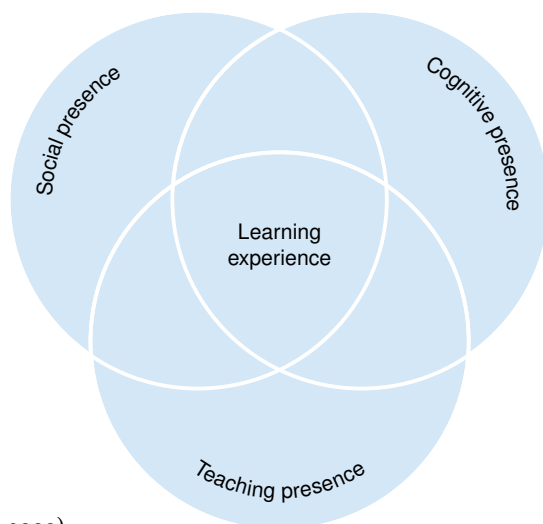 5. Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning;

FIGURE 8.1

Community of Inquiry
(adapted from Garrison et al., 2000)

6. The ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and con-
cepts is a core skill;
7. Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all
connectivist learning activities;
8. Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what
to learn and the meaning of incoming information are seen
through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right an-
swer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the
information climate affecting the decision.

- Online collaborative learning (OCL) in Harasim (2012) emphasises
the building of shared knowledge over meaningful collaboration
through the internet. To this end, knowledge construction goes
through three major stages: *idea generation* (brainstorming), *idea
organising* (comparing, analysing, and categorising through dis-
cussion and argument), and *intellectual convergence* (intellectual
synthesis and consensus), which reminds us of cognitivism and
Bloom's (1956) taxonomy.

Theoretical Models of ICC

The models of ICC intervene in VE in the sense that they help facili-
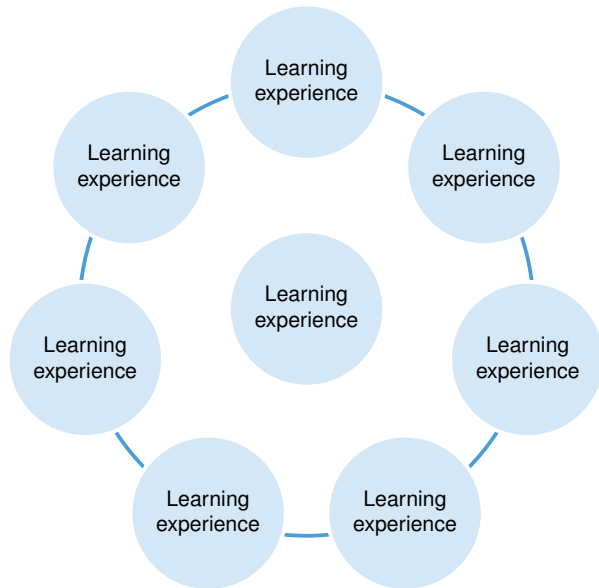tators develop the learners' ability to interact across cultures in an ef-

FIGURE 8.2
Strategies for
Teaching IC

fective and responsible way. We choose to explain three of the most renowned models for their applicability to education:

- Byram's (1997) model of ICC 'aims to develop learners as inter-cultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid stereotyping, which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity […] Intercultural communication is communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction' (p. 9). Intercultural training should follow specific strategies that Byram et al. (2002) summarise into 7: noticing, comparing (to promote comparative analysis with one's own culture), interpreting and interacting, adaptation (to adjust one's own behaviour with another culture), negotiation (to engage in cross-cultural negotiation within professional situations), and reflecting (Figure 8.2).
- Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid Model of ICC is composed of *attitudes* (i.e., respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery), *knowledge and comprehension* (i.e., cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness), *skills* (i.e., to listen, observe and evaluate, analyse, interpret, and relate), *desired internal outcomes*
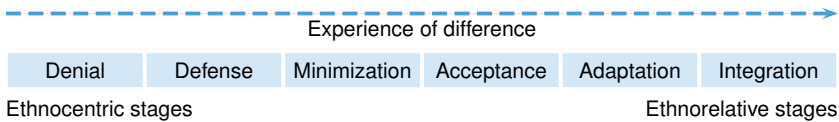
FIGURE 8.3   Development of Intercultural Sensitivity (adapted from Bennett, 1986)

(i.e., adaptability, flexibility, ethno-relative view, and empathy), and *desired external outcomes* (i.e., effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in an intercultural situation). Deardorff's (2006) ICC framework gives more interest to the active side of communication. She expresses overtly the importance of effective intercultural communication in the desired external outcome, which means 'behaving and communicating appropriately with people of other cultures.' She considers having positive attitudes towards other cultures a prerequisite step for effective intercultural communication. It is when the intercultural learners adopt a positive, respectful, and open stance towards the interlocutor that they become able to assimilate cultural knowledge, including self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge, and deep cultural knowledge.

- Bennett's (1986) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity is built over six stages ranging from ethnocentric to ethno-relative, namely denial, defence, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. These stages are placed on a linear continuum, but this should not lead to see them as continuous progress. The intercultural learner may go back and forth on this continuum (Figure 8.3).

It is worth considering that the learning theories, online teaching theories, and ICC theoretical models interfere together to make a VE successful and influential on the students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to develop them as global citizens. It is therefore important to understand the mechanisms of the four scenarios of VE and how the aforementioned theories are put into practise.

The Four Scenarios of Virtual Exchange

The four scenarios of virtual exchange are:

- *Preparatory or follow-up activity for physical mobility.* It is equally named blended mobility. It is set prior to or following a physical

mobility exchange for the purpose of providing high quality prepa-
ration, and ensuring that students succeed in their stay abroad or
reflect on their international experience.

- *Intertwined components of physical mobility.* Also blended mobil-
ity, knotted with physical mobility, into a single educational expe-
rience. The principal aim of this VE scenario is to expand the par-
ticipating student audience's physical mobility by involving those
who are not capable of travelling for longer periods of time.

- *Stand-alone learning activity.* This scenario is recognised as an in-
dividual activity that helps institutions introduce VE projects with
more restricted faculty contributions if wanted.

- *Component of a course, either traditional or online.* It is conducted
as an integral or required part of a course. This VE scenario is suit-
able for teachers who wish to give their course an international di-
mension. In this VE scenario, the teachers can design the course
or include a ready-made VE within a single course.

Roles and Appellations of the Facilitators in a Virtual Exchange

Developing ICC is directly related to the learners' efforts and stances
in their intercultural journey. First, there must be cultural awareness,
which starts with self-awareness on the part of the learners. Second,
they must admit to being learners. They should participate in solving
a problem solving situation in which they try to share their ideas and
discover other people's ideas that mirror their cultures. This way, stu-
dents realise the importance of showing views for stronger problem-
solving. Third, learners should be curious to know about the 'other'
for that 'other' to stop being strange and become an equal co-citizen
of global society. Fourth, learners should be ready to listen to and ob-
serve other people's cultural practices and views. According to McMa-
hon (2011), listening and watching are more effective than talking for
learning. Indeed, when talking, the learner will focus on their own cul-
ture. One must enter into an equal dialogue with members of other
cultures, and in the dialogue, there must be a speaker and a listener
in turns, so that no one talks all the time. This is the real meaning of a
healthy interaction. In the absence of intercultural dialogue, in which
one can listen to and observe the other, the learner can discover other
cultures through culturally authentic products (films, stories, pictures,
and artefacts). Fifth, it is of paramount importance for the learners to

develop their intercultural communication skills through experiencing different cultures. This is not only possible through travel or immersion in other societal contexts but also through exposure to cultural materials (McMahon, 2011).

During the virtual exchanges, the facilitators are not only the tutors of the online course but also play other significant roles in facilitating the virtual collaborative learning experience. They are partners, monitors, guides, and cultural mediators.

According to Muñiz and Angelini (2023), it is always advisable to count on trained instructors and facilitators to design and implement VE. Several technical aspects should be considered. The facilitator should have:

- The ability to use the chosen online medium to the extent that he/she can help others use the medium to communicate;
- The ability to multitask online and pay attention to technology, different communication methods, engagement, discussion content, time management, etc.;
- The ability to set up the online space for constructive engagement;
- The ability to read non-verbal communication online;
- The ability to establish and maintain clarity and understanding in all channels of communication;
- The ability to support participants with technical challenges and normalise the experience for the group.

Partners

During the VE, the students are not the only partners; the facilitators are partners too. Indeed, before collaborating in the course implementation, the VE facilitators engage in a partnership within which they cooperate to design and implement the course and the synchronous meeting scenarios and tasks.

Monitors and Mentors

During the VE implementation, the tutors facilitate, monitor, and observe the students' interactions in the forums. During the synchronous meetings, they encourage the students to contribute to the discussions and take part in the cultural activities. According to the Soliya Connect Programme, a facilitator helps the group communicate, addresses

group dynamics, keeps imbalances in check, and acknowledges emotions. A facilitator also makes the dialogue process explicit and promotes *awareness* of dialogue to help the group understand how their group process is going and why.

In addition, for the sake of raising awareness about online interaction strategies before the interaction begins, the educators provide students with examples or models of effective and appropriate strategies (Müller-Hartmann & O'Dowd, 2017; Ware, 2013).

Facilitators should be able to create a conducive environment for learning. For this, he/she must guarantee safety, honesty, and representativeness during the process. Dialogue participants should feel safe enough with each other to speak up and be able to express their feelings and opinions honestly, even when it is difficult. The facilitators' goal is to promote active listening to understand and engage, not to prove others wrong. Everyone should feel represented and heard (Muñiz & Angelini, 2023).

Guides

Instead of being the sole source of information, the tutors served more as guides to accompany the students throughout their intercultural journey. Educators participate in and guide online intercultural communication (Helm, 2016). Educators engage in guided reflection and discussion with students on extracts from their own online interactions (Vyatkina & Belz, 2006; Cunningham, 2016).

Cultural Mediators

In line with the intercultural approach in education, tutors in VE play the role of mediators between members of different cultural entities. In fact, the role of the mediator principally implies leading these different cultural entities to respect each other's cultural beliefs and practises, accept the cultural differences as enrichments to their cultural identities, and most of all, help them relativize their own beliefs and recognise their belonging to the same realm of global citizenry (Byram, 1997).

Virtual Exchange Implications for Internationalisation at Home

In the light of the findings of the previous studies on virtual exchange (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Kern, 2014; O'Dowd, 2017; Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Angelini & Muñiz, 2021), we can draw several conclusions about the implications of virtual exchange for internation-

isation at Home within Higher educational institutions (HEIS) in the underprivileged as well as the privileged corners of the world. Indeed, IAH can also include virtual mobility through virtual exchange with students of partner universities, which principally aims at integrating ICC as a learning outcome for the fulfilment of the principal goals of internationalisation at Home, namely enhancing local students' ICC, offering them opportunities for virtual collaboration in multicultural teams, consolidating their field knowledge, and sharpening their linguistic skills. Therefore, not only does VE provide the advantage of developing subject-related skills but also enabling skills leading to employability: intercultural communication, virtual teamwork and problem solving (Muñiz & Ben Malek, 2023)

By setting up internet-based intercultural contact for students, this is made possible through cyber-intergroup contact. In this sense, the Internet offers access to information about other cultures and to communication with members of other cultural backgrounds. People from different cultures can enter into online discussions without being obliged to move physically (Barrett et al., 2013; Fisher et al., 2004).

With regard to the research body on virtual exchange, it is worth noting that virtual collaborative learning may be a tool to provide educational inclusion for underprivileged and vulnerable students, such as the handicapped or refugees, which gives them equal opportunities to share and exchange cultural interests. They are therefore offered an international experience without caring about the funds or the visa.

Moreover, students can build partnerships and expand their intercultural network via collaborative online tools. To this end, VE empowers them with the right competencies, including intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and virtual collaboration skills vastly required in their employability process. Thus, the four VE scenarios are perfect for adopting ICC as a learning objective in the curricula of higher education institutions.

It is also important to note the merits of mingling international and local students within the same VE in order to get the most out of their international experience. In fact, they can co-construct their knowledge and competences within efficient and complementary partnerships. In this sense, Kramsch (1993) preaches for the learner's 'biculturalism' instead of taking the native speaker as 'the norm' or 'model.' Within the intercultural approach, the learner must keep a distance from the target culture in order not to be assimilated into it. They

should rather adopt a 'third position' (Liddicoat & Crozet, 1997) that exists between the host and the target cultures.

Therefore, adopting virtual collaborative learning for the sake of exchanging cultural reflections can be a strategic pillar of internationalisation at Home. This latter should therefore be acknowledged as an institutional policy within the overall strategy of internationalisation.

VE is immensely necessary for educators, researchers, and administrative staff not only to strengthen their connections with each other' but also to widen their networks according to their interests. Educators, for example, can build relationships with partners of different cultural backgrounds and thus discover how their counterparts in other cultures teach. Researchers can find partners, collaborators, or laboratories to carry out their research. As for the administrative staff, they can envision their careers within multicultural teams while collaborating virtually within VE teams.

Therefore, it is inevitable to create an action plan for the sustainable integration and accreditation of VE. Thus, recognising it as a source of ECTS is essential for the educational growth and internationalisation of students without leaving their home country. It is also crucially important that teachers and facilitators who design, implement, and carry out VE with their students are recognised in the higher education context, as they are a fundamental part of internationalisation at home. Nonetheless, there is no one-size-fits-all VE strategy that takes into consideration the specificities that every culture holds. As a result, VE implementation, including the course design, materials, and learning objectives, should be suitable for HEIS institutional, educational, and culturally specific contexts.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, virtual exchange can be an efficient tool in developing the competencies and skills essential to building students' international experience, namely intercultural communicative competence, collaboration skills, and language proficiency. Through virtual collaborative learning, these students are given equal opportunities to participate in the internationalisation process, which should no longer be the privilege of students belonging to specific places or with high incomes. Therefore, internationalisation at Home comes as an alternative or consolidation to the internationalisation strategy of universities. To this end, approving the potential of

virtual exchange to provide an international experience without leaving the home country should be taken into consideration when setting the overall internationalisation strategy of the university. Therefore, in the current chapter, we tried to shed light on the different theories that intervene in VE, the roles of educators in it, and the potential of VE as an efficient strategy for internationalisation at Home.

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