

Virtual Exchanges: A New Pedagogical Model for the Post-COVID Era?

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Abstract—Virtual exchanges are an emerging form of collaborative learning in which students from different countries connect and share knowledge via technology. We created a novel virtual exchange, *Business & Culture*, to connect students at institutions in the USA, Egypt, Lebanon, and Libya. The focus of the *Business & Culture* virtual exchange was on teaching cross-cultural competence, a key skill in today's increasingly globalized workplace. This paper will explore the design and implementation of this innovative virtual exchange program. We will enumerate the challenges of incorporating the needs and resources of four different institutions, discuss the benefits of the virtual exchanges to both students and instructors, and suggest future adaptations for enhancing the initiative's effectiveness.

Index Terms—globalization, global mindset, cross-cultural competence, pedagogy, educational exchange, virtual exchange

I. INTRODUCTION

Educational exchanges are nothing new. Indeed, the University of Oxford welcomed its first international student, Emo of Friesland, in 1190 [1]. But recent decades have witnessed a boom in student mobility. According to the Institute of International Education, the 2018/2019 academic year set a record year for both international students studying in the USA, and Americans studying abroad—1,095,299 and 347,0997 students respectively. The European Commission has been promoting student mobility since 1987, with some 4,000 university institutions from 31 countries participating in the project. More than 9 million people have participated in the Erasmus program since its creation [2].

In the context of business education more specifically, globalization and the rise of China, India, and other fast-growing economies, have prompted many business schools to incorporate educational exchanges into their curricula [3]. The logic is simple: to succeed in the global workplace means having a global mindset—the cultural awareness and cultural consciousness which a global economy demands—and educational exchanges are an

effective method to facilitate its development [4]. Educational exchanges also help to grow other related skills, including emotional resiliency, flexibility, personal autonomy, and openness [5].

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has revealed a significant limitation of traditional educational exchanges: geography. Indeed, as travel across borders became impossible, educational exchanges were paused. The pandemic caused great disruption to existing educational exchanges, and the uncertainty of when travel would resume made it difficult for most students to plan their future schedules. Even before the pandemic, traveling across borders to seek a cross-cultural experience was not feasible for many students. In the USA, for example, only one in 10 undergraduate students study abroad before graduating. Common reasons for not pursuing student exchange include scheduling challenges, financial constraints, and onerous degree requirements [6].

Virtual exchanges, which promote collaborative distance learning via technology, can be an effective and low-cost alternative to traditional educational exchanges. The conventional wisdom is that students who study abroad will 'naturally' come to understand and appreciate cultural differences. With virtual exchanges, however, instructors have a more controlled environment in which to facilitate cross-culture learning. Indeed, they can ensure that culture is not simply a passive backdrop, but instead is a topic for student analysis, reflection, and action. In this paper we propose to explore the design and implementation of *Business & Culture*, a virtual exchange which connects students at institutions in the USA, Egypt, Lebanon, and Libya, and whose focus is promoting cross-cultural competence.

II. THE BUSINESS AND CULTURAL VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

A. Rationale

The business and culture theme of the virtual exchange was premised on the notion that managing in the global economy requires not only knowledge of international business—macroeconomics, exchange rates, global logistics, etc.—but also knowledge of culture. Indeed, human beings are social animals and organize

themselves into groups. These groups, however, differ with respect to their worldviews, values, customs, norms, and so on. In other words, social groups (or societies) have cultural differences. These differences create strategic challenges for today's companies and suggest that managers must develop competencies in cross-cultural business. The business and cultural theme was also 'flexible' enough to be incorporated into different courses— international marketing at American University of Cairo (AUC), for example, and international management at American University of Beirut (AUB).

At the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, the business and cultural theme fit seamlessly into Dr. Branch's Cross-Cultural Business course, which begins by making the case for a cultural approach to international business. The narrative is that despite globalization, perhaps even because of globalization, culture still matters. The course then explores the conceptualization and operationalization of culture, primarily from anthropological and sociological perspectives. It then argues for the need to develop cross-cultural competence, underlining, ironically, that human culture prevents it. The course continues with a survey of tools for improving cross-cultural competence, including the Hofstede and Trompenaars models — two of the most widespread frameworks in cross-culture studies. It concludes by examining the ways in which culture impacts international business.

B. Modular Design

The Business & Culture virtual exchange was designed to be modular. It is used for different purposes by the four institutions and serves as only one component of their wider pedagogical programming. At AUB, the students are studying international business, with a focus on cross-cultural management. At AUC, the students are following a course in international marketing, and the emphasis of the Business & Culture virtual exchange is on the consulting project, which the students extend after the virtual exchange has concluded. At Benghazi Youth for Technology and Entrepreneurships (BYTE), the virtual exchange is a supplementary activity for high-performing students, most of whom are not pursuing business degrees.

This modular view is one key to the success of the Business & Culture virtual exchange. Indeed, it was very apparent during initial planning with the three partner institutions that trying to create a single 'universal' virtual exchange would have been folly. Different institutions have different academic calendars, different curricular needs, and so on. And consequently, it was much easier to get buy-in by creating the Business & Culture as a module which each institution could use in situ.

At AUB, the virtual exchange was a radical innovation. Indeed, the business school had to retrofit the largest of its auditorium-shaped classrooms, equipping it with the necessary video and audio technology to enable real-time views of the instructor and the students, and facilitate interaction with their virtual partners. In terms of curriculum, the Business & Culture virtual exchange was designed to complement an existing elective and serve as

an opportunity for students to delve into the intricacies of cross-cultural management.

At the University of Michigan, the Business & Culture virtual exchange was adopted in concert with an entirely new course which Dr. Branch proposed for the Bachelor of Business Administration degree. The course is entitled Cross-Cultural Business. Students at the Ross School of Business do not have any international business requirement for graduation. Several international elective courses do exist, however, in addition to traditional educational exchanges. None of the current international elective courses had a cultural theme, which provided an opportunity to develop an entirely new course with culture as its central theme.

Nested within the Cross-Cultural Business courses is the Business & Culture virtual exchange, a program of eight connected sessions of two hours each. During these connected sessions, students participate in various experiential activities. In the "My Culture" presentation, for example, students present their individual cultures in teams (in part to debunk common stereotypes), using a specific cultural model, such as the Hofstede or Trompenaars model. Students in other countries comment on these presentations and address their peers' questions. Not only does it help other classrooms to discover a new culture, it also increases the awareness of the local students about the roots of their own culture. Other sessions focus on case studies which reveal the challenges and opportunities of operating internationally, including an Egyptian jewelry manufacturer and a Lebanese winery, both of which are contemplating international expansion. Additionally, professors from the four institutions provide hands-on experiential activities and short lectures to the students. In the opening connected session, for example, John presents 'My Suit' whereby students learn that his suit represents the contributions of companies from fourteen countries— a perfect illustration of the interconnected global economy.

C. Global Connections

The Business & Culture virtual exchange facilitates connections among students across countries in a variety of ways. In a traditional in-person classroom, these connections would form naturally as students see each other in class, sit together, and talk during the breaks. In the virtual environment, however, it requires intentional design to forge these connections. For this reason, each connected session has a minimum of one breakout group activity, in which participants are teamed across countries.

We have also created more informal mechanisms for students to become acquainted. By using the cloud-based sharing board Padlet, for example, we enable students, instructors, and program administrators to introduce each other and incorporate personal photos and videos. We also have a Facebook page where they share articles which are related to cross-cultural business. Additionally, we have a blog, in which recent participants are invited to reflect on, and share highlights of, the virtual exchange.

Finally, the Business & Culture virtual exchange involves a simulated internationalization consulting project in which students, working in a geographically

dispersed team, consider a specific country as a possible destination market for a company. They conduct research on the destination market according to the 4Cs of a market (consumers, competitors, channel partners, and context), and analyze the results of this market research, from the company's perspective. In doing so, students put into practice the cross-cultural business skills and concepts of the virtual exchange.

D. Assessment

The Business & Culture virtual exchange also incorporates an online assessment—the Business Cultural Intelligence Quotient (BCIQ)—which measures extant student knowledge, and self-reports on motivation, listening and communicative adaptation, and cognitive preparation. The BCIQ is administered before the virtual exchange begins. Marina builds this BCIQ into a broader assignment, which requires students to construct and follow an 'Individual Development Plan'. John re-administers the BCIQ at the conclusion of his course; students can then use results from both assessments for the assignment, the Cross-Cultural Journal, in which students reflect on their personal and professional growth throughout the semester. Karim Itani, an AUB student, noted: "Scoring high in my BCIQ on motivation, listening skills, cognitive behavior preparation, and learning behavior are great indicators of my adoption of a *tabula rasa* on which I can base my learning and increase my global knowledge."

III. EVALUATION

A. Impact of the Virtual Exchange on Knowledge and Skills

WDI's Performance Measurement and Improvement and Education teams co-developed a rigorous monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plan to measure the impact of the virtual exchange on students, and to inform improvements following each offering. An electronic survey was administered to students at the start and end of the semester. We included both students who were enrolled in the virtual exchange, and a comparison group of undergraduate students who were recruited from the participating institutions. We collected quantitative and qualitative data on key constructs such as cross-cultural communication, collaboration, problem-solving, empathy, perspective-taking, cultural intelligence, and knowledge of the differing cultures. These constructs were selected based on requirements by the Stevens Initiative and its independent evaluator RTI International.

We have held the Business & Culture virtual exchange three times to-date from September 2019 to May 2021. Across the three semesters, we found statistically significant improvements in students' reported scores on empathy, cross-cultural communication skills, cultural quotients and knowledge on culture. No significant results were found on the remaining key variables of cross-cultural collaboration and problem-solving, and perspective-taking.

We measured the sustainability impacts of the virtual exchange through interviews with seven alumni, representing all four countries. We sought to understand their continued use of intercultural skills and knowledge which were taught in the Business & Culture virtual exchange at their workplace or in other classes, and with friends and family. Most importantly, we aimed to learn if the virtual exchange had changed students with regard to their biases and assumptions about people from different cultures and backgrounds.

More than half the students who were interviewed shared that they used the skills and knowledge which were taught in the Business & Culture virtual exchange three to four times a week. All students noted that they used the skills in their workplace or university. Even more notable, all students said that the virtual exchange had helped them become more empathetic, perceptive and less self-absorbed.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. The Value of Virtual Exchanges for Students

From our initial three offerings, we have drawn several conclusions about the value of virtual exchange. First, we have found virtual exchanges to be an effective way to sensitize students to other cultures. They are also cost-effective because they do not require any travel. Further, they can be conducted at scale. When students connect through their individual devices, there is not even the constraint of seats in a classroom. So long as there are roughly equal numbers of students across the countries, we can easily foresee accommodating 50 students per country each semester.

Internationalization is a strategic goal of many universities these days. But what internationalization is, and how it is implemented, can vary dramatically from university to university. Indeed, as Knight and DeWit [7] explain: "Internationalization has become a very broad and varied concept, including many new rationales, approaches, and strategies in different and constantly changing contexts." Virtual exchanges are one more mode of learning for higher education institutions to understand and consider.

Students in business degree programs tend to be practically oriented. Through their undergraduate education, they are seeking preparation for the working world. We have seen how the Business & Culture virtual exchange equips them with many in-demand skills for the global workplace, with our impact study showing statistically significant improvements in perspective-taking, cross-cultural communication skills, cultural intelligence, and cultural knowledge. Further, our students have blogged about how the virtual exchange has prepared them for the workplace. University of Michigan student Justin Ballard was able to apply what he learned in the course directly to his virtual summer internship at a Congressional office. He wrote: "I am thankful for the critical telework skills I obtained through working on a substantial consulting project with students from the MENA region in this course. In

navigating obstacles unique to this type of group work, such as having to reconcile time zone differences, I have found the virtual assignments and group projects I am engaged in now to be straightforward in comparison.”

B. The Value of Virtual Exchanges for Instructors

Virtual exchanges are also enriching not just for students, but also for instructors. They are a wonderful way to nurture new connections and collaboration among instructors who teach in other regions of the world. John, for example, by working together on the curriculum and co-teaching aspects of the virtual exchange, has forged a relationship with Marina Apaydin, professor of international business at the American University of Beirut. They are now collaborating on a co-edited book about the internationalization of higher education. Marina added, “Being a naturalized Canadian who had lived in the United States for 6 years, I was happy to join this important program to share my understanding and appreciation of the Middle Eastern cultures with the North American students. As is true of the Egyptian jewelry designer from one of the business cases I selected to incorporate into this program, I, too, aspire to change the image of the Middle East in the world through cultural education.”

Virtual exchanges might also have unexpected positive externalities. For example, when the Lebanese Revolution erupted and access to the university became dangerous, the AUB course shifted seamlessly from in-class to online, which subsequently paved the way for a continuous virtual format in 2020, in response to a complete country lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

C. Next Steps with Business & Culture Virtual Exchange

After three semesters as an ‘experimental’ course, Cross-Cultural Business was accepted as a permanent offering at the Ross School of Business. Because the course is based not on the analysis of any one country’s culture, but rather on cross-cultural frameworks and tools, we could partner with universities anywhere in the world for the Business & Cultural virtual exchange component. Very pointedly, this means that when the grant funding ends (which it will after the fourth offering), we can continue to implement the virtual exchange within the Cross-Cultural Business course with new partners. It would indeed be interesting to add a partner from a different part of the world, one in which the culture is very different than the American or Middle Eastern cultures. While it would be great to include Japan, for example, the fourteen-hour time difference between Tokyo and Ann Arbor would make that impractical. Countries in Europe or South America are better candidates and would certainly introduce other cultural lens into the Business & Culture virtual exchange.

Whichever direction we ultimately decide to take, the experience of creating and offering the Business & Culture virtual exchange has been transformative for all participants. We have seen the power of this mode of

learning, and we shall continue to utilize it for years to come.

V. CONCLUSION

We are convinced that virtual exchanges are an effective and economical way to sensitize students to other cultures and engage them in hands-on activities that are useful in developing cross-cultural knowledge, skills, and competencies – valuable assets in an increasingly globalized economy. An additional benefit of these exchanges is the opportunity for instructors from different universities to collaborate, share knowledge, and learn from their colleagues about diverse cultures, institutional environments, and teaching methodologies. In our view, virtual exchanges represent a promising new pedagogical model for teaching business in the post-COVID era.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Dr. Branch conducted the research and analyzed the data for this paper; Dr. Branch and Dr. Wernick collaborated on writing and editing the paper.

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Dr. Branch has been involved in a variety of European Union and other government-funded development projects, most notably in the republics of the former USSR, including Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, and in those of Eastern and Central Europe. He has also conducted management training and consulting in numerous international companies, including Anheuser-Busch, British Telecom, Cargill, Mercedes Benz, Oracle, Coca-Cola, Michelin, Ericsson, and Nestlé.

Dr. Branch is originally from Canada. He holds a Bachelor of Engineering Science in electronics from the University of Western Ontario (Canada), a Master of Business Administration from the University of New Brunswick (Canada), a Master of Arts in education from Washington University in Saint Louis (USA), a Doctor of Philosophy in marketing from the University of Cambridge (England), a Doctor of Education from the University of Michigan (USA), and a Doctor of Professional Studies from Middlesex University (England).

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