

Hidden Hurdles: Examining administrative and academic imbalances within virtual exchange programs

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While online education has rapidly expanded globally, in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there remained many who cautioned the development of online models of international education. Just as there were those who warned against the rapid development of short-term mobility programs and the waning focus on long-term cultural immersion, many seasoned and well-respected practitioners were and remain hesitant about the similarly-inevitable development of online global program models, known widely as virtual exchange. Though the development of virtual exchange programs had seen strong acceptance in Europe and elsewhere prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the global crisis and the subsequent national lockdowns created the perfect circumstances for a widespread pivot to virtual exchange partnerships and other online program models. Now, it seems as if the wheel has been set into motion which will bring virtual exchange programs into the minds of nearly every international educator.

With the swift launch of virtual exchange programs has come unique approaches to partnership development, strategic planning, and program implementation. Since the early 2000s, established models such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) have risen as widely-accepted approaches which focus on the structure and logistics of creating and facilitating virtual exchanges (Guth and Rubin, 2015). When reviewing the focus of existing academic works on the topic, most can be placed into three major categories: structural and pedagogical design, intercultural facilitation in a virtual environment, and single-course or single-institution

case studies. Yet, as noted in the *2020 Annotated Bibliography on Virtual Exchange Research*, “Many studies note certain elements of international virtual exchange that the researchers believe lead to a deeper impact; however, these are rarely the components being studied within the research design” (2020 Annotated Bibliography on Virtual Exchange Research, 2021). If the field of international education is to adopt virtual exchange methodologies long-term, it must move beyond structural design and development to examine the underlying variables which impact the success or failure of these programs. My research will explore two notable and under-examined variables: power dynamics and asymmetry among institutions, faculty members, and students engaged in virtual exchange.

Within international education, scholars and practitioners are increasingly arguing that virtual learning spaces have “the potential for transformative learning and, in the context of intercultural encounters, can lead to critical intercultural learning, provided the necessary scaffolding is provided (Jørgensen, Mason, Pedersen and Harrison, 2020). However, scaffolding alone will not ensure the equitable, demarginalizing “third space” learning environments Bhabha (Bhabha, 1988) envisioned, “in which two or more disparate social or cultural paradigms interact to form new or hybrid ways of thinking or being” (Roy, 2021). In fact, without awareness of the power dynamics and asymmetries present in virtual exchange programs, and an intentional approach to mitigating them throughout all phases of the process, virtual exchange programs can be instruments of marginalization and exploitation.

These imbalances may be overt, such as differences in academic culture (King Ramírez, 2020) and student technological fluency (Chang and Gomes, 2021), or may be less obvious, such as power dynamics related to faculty training effectiveness (Brighton, 2020), funding availability (Tjulin et al., 2021), and institutional priorities and support (Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus, 2016).

While the overt imbalances may be easier to identify and address before and during the program, the impacts of less-obvious imbalances may not be realized until the program has ended, if at all. For example, a course which receives negative student feedback may be seen as a failure due to faculty tension, when in reality, the core source of the failure (and the faculty tension) was competing or vastly different institutional priorities.

The long-term success of a virtual exchange partnership cannot rely solely on the strength of the pedagogy or cleverness of the course design; a deeper awareness of underlying power dynamics and asymmetries must be established. As Fairclough pointed out, “all communication is influenced by power relations” (Fairclough, 1989, cited in Jorgensen, 2020). In order to draw out these variables, I intend on conducting surveys of virtual exchange participants as well as interviews with involved staff and faculty of the partnering institutions. In this way, I hope to not only discover where student experiences and perceptions diverge, but also to better understand the administrative realities which may or may not contribute to those student experiences and perceptions. This will hopefully allow for direct links to be established between administrative and academic inputs and the outputs revealed through stakeholder feedback.

I hope to conduct this research not only with the COIL courses in which I am involved in my professional practice, but also with similar programs at a number of other institutions. Given the nature of my questions, I would like to collect data from virtual exchange courses with a wide range of administrative differences, both culturally and structurally. Considering my growing involvement in this area, I hope to leverage professional connections to make this happen, but it is a possibility that I may find it difficult to collect some of the data, particularly information about institutional priorities and funding.

Virtual exchange programming is a rapidly-growing area within international education,

and as such, there are many facets of the topic which remain underexplored academically. Thus far, little research has been done outside of single-institution case studies regarding how power dynamics and stakeholder asymmetries influence student outcomes and perceptions as well as the overall success of courses and underlying partnerships, despite research which shows that even simple online communities are subject to hidden hierarchies and asymmetrical influence (Koseoglu and Bozkurt, 2018). The field of international education remains focused on structural design and pedagogy development, but if virtual exchange is to truly become a viable model long-term, it is essential to address underlying stakeholder issues. By studying the complex power dynamics and asymmetries present within virtual exchange partnerships, I hope to discover how these issues impact student perceptions and course success, thereby connecting inputs and outputs in a way which can subsequently be addressed through administrative and academic interventions. In this way, practitioners involved in virtual exchange projects may become more aware of potential issues and can identify and address them quickly.

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