

11-15-2019

Bridging the Cultural and Linguistic Divide Through Virtual Exchange

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Recommended Citation

Ceo-DiFrancesco, Diane; Marturet de Paris, Carolina; Kennedy Mora, Oscar; León Oyarzabal, Xóchitl; Santacruz Bastidas, Edison Rene; Mena-Böhlke, María; and Böhlke, Olaf (2019) "Bridging the Cultural and Linguistic Divide Through Virtual Exchange," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 9 : No. 1 , Article 4. Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol9/iss1/4>

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Abstract

The AUSJAL/AJCU Virtual Exchange Program maximizes the strengths of the Jesuit educational mission and its network to establish sustainable partnerships across borders, language and cultural divides. Initiated in 2006 as a grass roots project between two language instructors, the collaboration has grown to involve 22 universities, 29,561 students and 200 instructors in an innovative, high impact practice that leverages technologies to foster global engagement through virtual interaction. This study documents the perspectives of U.S. and Latin American students participating in virtual exchange experiences at five Jesuit universities. Specifically, research methodology included qualitative data collection to examine the impact of a strategically designed virtual exchange learning experience. Results of analysis of students' written reflections indicate tendencies in the development of the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for intercultural competence, and the role of virtual exchange in the development of empathy and compassion through encounter and dialogue that can lead to growth in global awareness and solidarity for and with others.

Keywords

virtual exchange, Jesuit higher education, intercultural competence, global awareness, solidarity, Spanish language study, English language study

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Abstract

The AUSJAL/AJCU Virtual Dual Immersion Program maximizes the strengths of the Jesuit educational mission and its network to establish sustainable partnerships across borders, languages and cultural divides. Established in 2006 as a grass roots project between two language instructors, the collaboration has grown to involve twenty-two universities, more than 30,000 students and 200 instructors in an innovative, high-impact practice that leverages technologies to foster global engagement through virtual, face-to-face interaction. This study documents the perspectives of US and Latin American students participating in virtual exchange experiences at five Jesuit universities. Specifically, research methodology included qualitative data collection to examine the impact of a strategically-designed virtual exchange learning experience. Results of analysis of students' written reflections indicate tendencies in the development of the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for intercultural competence, and the role of virtual exchange in the development of empathy and compassion through encounter and dialogue that can lead to growth in global awareness and solidarity for and with others.

Introduction

As Jesuit institutions of higher education are summoned to serve as bridges for the widening gap between human groups in today's society,¹ focusing on cultural strengths is essential to increasing engagement across borders, languages and cultures.² In order to enhance the learning experience across Jesuit colleges and universities, it is important to examine how existing models of collaboration can assist in building future

programs with an eye toward sustainability. The AUSJAL/AJCU Virtual Dual Immersion (VDI) Program, supported by AUSJAL, maximizes the strengths of the Jesuit educational mission and its network with the goal of establishing sustainable partnerships across borders, languages and cultural divides by improving cross-cultural awareness, increasing communication skills and building international solidarity. Through the pedagogical application of synchronous one-to-one video conferencing, the VDI fosters global engagement

through virtual, face to face interaction and sets an example for collaboration across diverse environments and circumstances by providing students access to equitable and affordable educational opportunities.

This article reports the outcomes of a pedagogical project leveraging synchronous virtual exchange in both English and Spanish. The overarching research questions are: (1) To what extent does virtual exchange enhance students' reflection on cultural norms and perspectives? (2) To what extent does participation in virtual exchange affect students' perception of their peers from other cultures? (3) To what extent does participation in telecollaboration enhance growth in intercultural competency?

Intercultural Competence

Researchers have written about the concept of intercultural competence for over five decades, yet a consensus on its definition has not been reached, partially because terminology differs across disciplines.³ Several of these terms cited in research include global competence, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, cultural competence and cultural humility. For the purposes of this research, the term *intercultural competence* will be used. Along with the multitude of terminology, numerous theories and models for describing intercultural competence have also been developed. Bennet's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity describes the growth that can take place, beginning from a place of ethnocentricity and developing into a more ethno-relative individual.⁴ The Multidimensional Model of Intercultural Competence, developed by Byram, illustrates the attitudes, knowledge and skills that an individual needs to interact across cultures.⁵ According to Byram, interculturally competent individuals express curiosity and interest about the culture of others, communicate information about their own culture and demonstrate appropriate and effective interaction across cultures. Liddicoat and Scarino identify three dimensions of thought processes that reflect ongoing development of intercultural competence.⁶ These thought processes include noticing cultural norms, comparing cultural norms and practices, and reflecting on the underlying cultural perspectives.

In order to create consensus among a multitude of theoretical frameworks of intercultural competence, Deardorff employed the Delphi technique to create her intercultural competence model.⁷ This model focuses on the internal and external outcomes resulting from the ongoing development of attitudes, knowledge and skills that can lead to intercultural competence. Key components of the Deardorff model are the roles of critical thinking, reflection and attitudes that influence the ongoing developmental process. According to Deardorff, researchers do agree on one feature of intercultural competence, that of viewing the world through differing lenses and from different perspectives.⁸

Virtual Exchange

The online environment provides distinct advantages by linking students located in different parts of the world and by offering effective and multiple means of facilitating collaborations.⁹ According to Kern, Ware and Warschauer, educators are offered opportunities to "use the internet not so much to teach the same thing in a different way, but rather to help students enter into the realm of collaborative inquiry and construction of knowledge, viewing their expanding repertoire of identities and communication strategies as resources in the process."¹⁰ In today's technology-driven world, this high-impact educational practice breaks down the walls of the classroom by transforming it into an authentic context involving real communication with both psycho-social purposes and informational outcomes.¹¹

Virtual exchange refers to the use of an online format in which students engage with their peers from other educational institutions to complete collaborative tasks in a virtual cultural context for educational purposes.¹² Virtual exchange has been referred to by numerous terms, including e-tandem, teletandem, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), and telecollaboration, yet the basis for this pedagogical tool is the global interaction between students through the use of internet technology to create opportunities for the exchange of information, ideas and perspectives.¹³ Although language educators have employed virtual exchange in various forms for more than 20 years, its use as an

innovative tool for language and intercultural development in both language classrooms and across disciplines has increased in more recent years.¹⁴ Formats for virtual exchanges include asynchronous written communication between students of differing native languages, for example through the use of e-mail or discussion boards, and synchronous, for example one-on-one video conferencing between students of differing native languages, with classroom time split 50% in the target language and 50% in the native language. One model, which expands the pedagogy of virtual exchange to cross-disciplinary collaborations, includes the use of interactive tasks between groups of students at two or more institutions of higher learning in order to enhance their global understanding and integrate the application of disciplinary specific knowledge.¹⁵

The number of programs has also grown to include fee-based options offered by private service providers.¹⁶ Formats for these fee-based models include individual or small groups of learners and a native speaker coach who serves as a guide in scaffolding learners toward enhancing language acquisition. Service provider models ease the demands on the instructor to schedule, coordinate and facilitate the virtual exchange sessions, but add additional costs for the students. Such fee-based models usually serve students in privileged world language contexts in the United States.

Studies point to the limitations of global student mobility, and a two-tier system consisting of a privileged minority of students studying abroad and a globalized curriculum for majority students to participate in “internationalization at home.”¹⁷ Although many may argue that there is no comparison to face-to-face experiences abroad, virtual exchange has been identified as a means of leveling the global preparation of students who, for reasons related to finances, personal constraints or curricular limitations, are unable to travel abroad.¹⁸ Evidence in research suggests that virtual exchange plays a role in enhancing students’ knowledge of global issues and the development of linguistic and cross-cultural competencies.¹⁹ In fact, virtual exchange has influenced the way people are working, teaching and learning all around the world. As more and more practitioners and programs integrate virtual

exchange into curriculum and approaches to internationalization, it is critical to understand how this pedagogical tool contributes to the development of intercultural competence.

Methods and Procedures

This article explores the participation of university language students in a curricular model of virtual cultural and language exchange, and describes the ongoing intercultural competency development from the students’ perspectives. IRB approval from the five universities involved was obtained prior the commencement of the study, and each participant consented prior to the coding of the information collected. Students participated in a series of four to six virtual exchange sessions of fifty to sixty minutes in duration, integrated into their language course curriculum over the duration of a semester, and they wrote a pre- and post-essay regarding their experience. The pre-treatment essay prompt focused on what students anticipated that they would learn from the experience, while the post-treatment essay prompted subjects to reflect on what they had learned from participation in the virtual sessions.

Research Design

Due to the nature of intercultural competency development, this study utilized descriptive qualitative research design to gain participants’ perspectives on their virtual exchange experience, using a written essay format. Data collection was in the form of an online survey, with an open-ended essay prompt for participants to respond by describing their expectations and reflect on their experiences.

Description of the Program

Context

The AUSJAL-AJCU Virtual Dual Immersion Program (VDI) a model of virtual exchange, was created and developed through the Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America (AUSJAL) and the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities in the United States (AJCU), and, since 2009, has functioned under the leadership and support of the Executive Secretary of AUSJAL. The VDI program is an

international virtual exchange network that offers students language practice and an intercultural exchange with native speaker students from partner institutions. It aims to provide a progressive, efficient and effective methodology for language learning and intercultural understanding through dialogue and human connection for all students and professors. Guided by Ignatian philosophy, pedagogy and the Jesuit educational mission, the network cultivates diversity and inclusive educational practices to develop citizens equipped with the competencies to engage as global citizens of the twenty first century.

The VDI Program has been identified as a “network of emerging practices,” following the Unicollaboration Conference in Dublin, Ireland in 2016.

In the Dublin conference, there were also some examples of telecollaborative networks involving various institutions or practitioners around a common theme. One of the most interesting of these was the Virtual Dual Immersion Program which is a telecollaboration project founded by the Jesuit universities in Latin America and the United States. The presenters Marturet de Paris and Coffey²⁰ explained the project was grounded in the mission to bridge the social, linguistic, and intercultural gaps among students of English and Spanish in Jesuit universities in the United States and Latin America.²¹

More than 30,000 students and 200 faculty make up the list of international participants in this learning partnership, representing twenty-two institutions. An average of 900 students and ten universities participate each semester. Through the network, paired educators collaborate to integrate virtual exchange experiences into their Spanish and English language course curriculum.

Structure of Virtual Sessions and Task Design

One to one virtual sessions are divided into two parts, with learners interacting in English exclusively for half of the session time and then

conducting interaction in Spanish exclusively for the second half of the session. Prior to the commencement of the first virtual exchange, students reviewed communication norms with their instructors to facilitate the smooth and respectful implementation of the sessions. A sample list of the communication norms included recommendations for supporting partner interaction:

General Norms for Supporting your Partner

1. Provide as much information as you can about the assigned topic.
2. Speak clearly, pausing periodically to allow time for your partner to process your words.
3. Try to help your partner with the pronunciation of difficult words.
4. Be creative with your vocabulary, in case your partner does not understand. Be prepared to explain specific terms or slang.
5. Make eye contact and continue to focus on your partner to show interest.
6. Keep all distractions to a minimum. Turn off notifications on your screen and cell phone to focus on your partner and the conversation.
7. Let your partner finish speaking before you speak. Try not to interrupt or finish your partner's sentences.
8. Focus intently on your partner without trying to think of what you will say next.
9. Encourage your partner to continue speaking by using expressions like “yes,” “I agree,” “true,” “interesting,” “tell me more.”
10. Demonstrate curiosity and interest in the information that your partner shares by asking follow-up questions to enrich your conversation.
11. Give your partner a moment to gather his/her thoughts to formulate a response to a question. This may take a moment, so allow silence as a natural part of the conversation.

12. Be open to your partner's perspectives and be willing to share your own.
13. Make observations regarding cultural norms and similarities. Ask questions to invite your partner to provide clarifications and explanations.
14. Exercise flexibility and graciously adjust questions and words as needed to help your partner understand and successfully communicate.
15. Express gratitude for the interaction and the support that your partner offered to you.

For the purpose of this study, all sessions followed the same task design and the same pedagogical phases of activation, interaction and reflection. During the activation phase, students reflected on their own culture and prepared photos and resources to present the cultural theme to their partner through the lens of their native language and culture. During the fifty to sixty-minute interaction phase, students actively immersed themselves in English and Spanish as they discussed cultural practices, products and perspectives. Following the virtual exchange, the reflection phase required students to write a written reflection that students posted on the discussion board of their learning management system or submitted directly to their instructor. Further reflection took place during follow-up class sessions in which the instructor prompted students to share perspectives in the target language. This methodology of Activation-Interaction-Reflection (AIR), developed by Coffey, Mora, Ceo-DiFrancesco and Marturet, comprises the basis for the AUSJAL-AJCU Virtual Dual Immersion Program (VDI) exchange sessions.²²

Researchers implemented a set of common tasks for all virtual sessions and groups of students, following the AIR model. Six total tasks included the following themes:

- The Importance of Education in Society
- The Presence of the Second Language in My City
- The Positive and Negative Aspects of Tourism

- My Identity
- Create Your Own Session
- The Jesuit Mission at Our Universities²³

Tasks for the virtual sessions included clear instructions for each phase of the virtual exchange. Sample guidelines provided to student participants can be viewed in the instructions below for session #2:

Telecolaboración #2 Tema: Lugares favoritos y la presencia del idioma en tu ciudad

Activación:

- Prepara fotos de los lugares que frecuentas en tu propia ciudad y las actividades que realizas. Por ejemplo, en tu opinión ¿Cuál es el mejor lugar para ir de compras? ¿Hay un barrio artístico? ¿Dónde hay clubes con música en vivo? ¿Hay cafés al aire libre? ¿Tienes uno preferido?
- Busca una foto de la presencia del idioma que estudias en tu ciudad para compartir con tu compañero/a.
- Reflexiona sobre el papel del idioma que estudias en tu comunidad.

Interacción

- Utiliza Skype y la lista de usuarios y contraseñas.
- Empieza la sesión en inglés. Tu compañero hablará de los lugares de su ciudad. ¡**No uses español** con él/ella durante esta parte de la sesión! En cambio, podrías ayudar con sugerencias de palabras en inglés, la pronunciación, aprobaciones, etc. Refiere a la hoja de sugerencias: Normas de comunicación.
- Durante la segunda parte de la sesión, conversarás en español. Comparte tus fotos y tus opiniones con tu compañero/a. Habla sobre el papel del español en tu comunidad.
- Escucha la presentación de tu compañero/a y hazle preguntas.

- Conversa con él/ella sobre las diferencias y similitudes culturales.

Reflexión:

Toma nota de la circunstancia y las ideas de tu compañero/a. ¿Son diferentes a las tuyas? ¿Cómo? ¿Son iguales? ¿Con qué ideas estaban de acuerdo? ¿Qué semejanzas y diferencias notaste durante la conversación? ¿Qué te dice de la cultura de los dos? En el foro, escribe un informe de 200-300 palabras, explicando tus ideas.²⁴

Telecollaboration #2 Theme: Favorite Places and the Presence of Language in Your City

Activation:

- Prepare photos of places that you frequent in your own city and the activities that you do there. For instance, in your opinion, what is the best place to go shopping? Is there an artistic neighborhood? Where are clubs with live music located? Are there outdoor cafes? Do you have a favorite one?
- Look for a photo of the presence of the language you are studying in your city and share it with your partner.
- Reflect on the role of the language you study in your community.

Interaction:

- Utilize Skype and the generic list of accounts and passwords.
- Start the session in English. Your partner will speak about places in his/her city. Do not use Spanish with him/her during this part of the session. Instead, you can help with suggesting words in English, helping with pronunciation, encouragement, etc. Refer to the handout: Norms of Communication.
- During the second part of the session, you will converse in Spanish. Share your photos and opinions with

your partner. Talk about the role of Spanish in your community.

- Listen as your partner presents and ask him/her questions.
- Speak with him/her about cultural differences and similarities.

Reflection

Take note of the circumstances and ideas of your partner. Are they different from yours? How? Are they the same? With which ideas are you both in agreement? What similarities and differences did you note during the conversation? What did these tell you about the culture of both of you? On the discussion board, write a 200-300 word report, explaining your ideas.

Participants

Participants in a qualitative descriptive study must have experience with the identified phenomenon and be willing to share their perspectives.²⁵ This study utilized a purposive, convenience sampling of students, enrolled in six language courses at five Jesuit universities, one each in Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, and two in the United States. All students enrolled in the language courses were given the opportunity to participate in the study. None were excluded for any reason. In total, 180 students consented to participate in the project. Of those, 65 completed both the pre- and the post-essays that could be linked to the same participant. Of the remainder, 52 did not complete either or both the pre- or the post-essay due to absences or other reasons, and 63 did not provide the necessary identification information to allow the linking of their essays. Therefore, we report on a subset of 65 participants with linked pre- and post-essays.

These 65 participants included 43 females, 20 males and two classified as non-binary. Age range of students was 18 to 25 years. All were undergraduate students in a wide range of major programs. No participants were beginning language learners. Pairing of students was random for each session.

Methodology

With the universities' IRB approval, each participant consented prior to completing an online survey with a pre- and a post-essay question. The question prompted students to reflect on the process of the development of intercultural communicative competence and the acquisition of languages, describing what they had learned about others and about themselves as a result of their participation in the virtual exchange sessions. All pre- and post-essays were analyzed by three researchers. Thematic analysis was undertaken with each researcher reading all essays three times, practicing coding on the last reading utilizing Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Process Model.²⁶ Essays were coded for occurrences for each of the components of the model: Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills, Internal Outcomes and External Outcomes. Frequency counts were tabulated and utilized to compare groups. Researchers then compared open coding of subthemes that emerged pertaining to the context of virtual exchange.

To ensure interrater reliability, researchers conducted group training on a subset of essays, working independently and comparing results. Triangulation of researchers minimized personal bias or assumptions regarding virtual exchange. The experiences of each researcher included two

bilingual course instructors and one bilingual researcher and educator with expertise in virtual exchange and qualitative research.

Results

Data analysis yielded frequency of occurrences of each component of Deardorff's Intercultural Competency Process Model in students' pre- and post-essays.²⁷ Total occurrences tabulated for the AUSJAL native Spanish speakers was 49 for the 22 pre-essays and 72 for the 22 post-essays. Spanish native speakers studying English increased the examples they cited in post-essays versus pre-essays for the components of Knowledge and Comprehension, Skills, Internal Outcomes and External Outcomes. Conversely, the number of examples for the Attitudes component of the Deardorff model decreased between the pre- and post-essays. Total occurrences coded for the AJCU native English speakers studying Spanish was 81 for the 43 pre-essays and 159 for the 43 post-essays. There was a similar increase in occurrences in post- versus pre-essays for the components of Knowledge and Comprehension, Skills, Internal and External Outcomes. The AJCU group cited more examples pertaining to the component of Attitudes in their pre- versus post-essays. Details of these results are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency Counts of events

	Attitudes	Knowledge and Comprehension	Skills	Internal Outcomes	External Outcomes
AUSJAL Pre-Essays	31 (63%)	18 (36%)	0	0	0
AUSJAL Post-Essays	5 (7%)	37 (51%)	2 (3%)	12 (17%)	16 (22%)
AJCU Pre-Essays	43 (53%)	28 (35%)	10 (12%)	0	0
AJCU Post-Essays	20 (13%)	57 (36%)	25 (16%)	31 (19%)	26 (16%)

n=43 AJCU; n=22 AUSJAL

Discussion

This study sought to assess the extent to which participation in virtual exchange enhances growth in intercultural competence. Subjects from Latin American and the United States demonstrated a shift in growth of intercultural competency development in the post- compared to the pre-essays. For the Latin American students, 100% of the pre-essay occurrences fell under the categories of Required Attitudes and Knowledge and Comprehension, whereas 58% of the post-essay occurrences fell under the same categories, with the remainder occurring under the process model components of Skills, Internal and External Outcomes. Subjects from the United States demonstrated similar growth patterns, with 88% of the occurrences from the pre-essays falling under the components of Required Attitudes and Knowledge and Comprehension. While 49% fell under these same categories for post-essay occurrences, 51% of the occurrences fell under the components of Skills, Internal and External Outcomes, showing similar growth as the Latin American counterparts.

Required Attitudes are the first step in the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence and the Process Model of Intercultural Competence.²⁸ These required attitudes include “Respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity), Openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgement) and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty).”²⁹ Subjects from both groups referenced attitudes more often in their pre-essays, anticipating an activity that would afford them the opportunity to learn from their peers about another culture, to interact in the target language and possibly to make new friends. Students expressed openness to learn new information about the target cultures, curiosity about their peers, and an overall positive attitude toward the upcoming experience. Below are several examples that subjects wrote to describe the anticipated treatment.

AJCU 5 Pre-Essay: “I believe that by learning about other cultures we open ourselves to a better understanding of the world around us.”

AJCU 9 Pre-Essay: “The things that I could learn about the other people and their cultures would be amazing because there are many different cultures out there.”

AUSAL 3 Pre-Essay: Nos permite adquirir capacidades cognitivas e interpretativas, el aprendizaje nos enriquece de la cultura, hábitos y costumbres de las sociedades, nos abre un panorama de visión distinto, aprendemos hábitos diferentes, aprendemos a relacionar cosas con palabras, acciones, entre otros, con el fin de garantizar un buen aprendizaje. Las personas políglotas, adquieren además un sentido de integridad para con la sociedad, dependiendo del enfoque del aprendizaje del idioma (negocios, cultura general) puede generar impactos a largo plazo, recordemos que cada vez mas el mundo esta globalizado, por eso necesitamos adaptar nuestras capacidades a un mundo competitivo que exige nuevos parámetros de conocimientos.

It allows us to gain cognitive and interpretive abilities, the learning can enrich us through the cultural norms and the customs of the society, it opens up for us a distinct panoramic vision, we learn different norms, we learn to relate things with words, actions, etc., guaranteeing an effective learning experience. People who are polyglots, acquire also a sense of integrity for and with society, depending on the focus on the language study (business culture, general) it can generate long term impacts, keeping in mind that each day the world becomes more globalized, so we need to adapt our abilities to a competitive world that demands new parameters of knowledge.

The openness, curiosity and willingness to engage expressed by the subjects is a key condition in the development of intercultural competence.³⁰ The descriptions in the pre-essays denote positive attitudes, creating a context from which further learning and development can occur.

The Knowledge and Comprehension component of the Deardorff model includes “Cultural self-awareness, deep understanding and knowledge of culture, culture-specific information and sociolinguistic awareness.”³¹ The occurrences of this component are the most prevalent in the post-essays for both the AJCU and the AUSJAL groups. Subjects demonstrate a consciousness of the existence of the cultural dimension and the influence of the experience on their development through their descriptions of concrete examples of culture-specific information, events and contexts that lead to intercultural understanding.

AJCU 21 Post-Essay: I enjoyed learning about food, music, culture, both the similarities and the differences. Before these skype calls, I knew almost nothing specifically about Ecuador, and the life there. We talked about what our schools are like and I found that school life at their university there is vastly different than life here at....

AJCU 30 Post-Essay: I have learned that the classes at Ibero are longer than the classes we take at Xavier. I have also learned that the price of attending college is less expensive than here in the United States. Also, Financial aid is not a thing at Ibero. They receive scholarships from the university they attend but it is more likely for their parents to pay for the university up front. Most people I have chatted with do not live on their campus like we tend to do here in the United States. it is more common for them to live in an apartment off campus. Also, most people I have talked to do not have a job while they're in college which is very different from the United States where most students attending college have at least one job.

AUSJAL 3 Post-Essay: El aprendizaje que he obtenido, me ha servido para conocer los hábitos y costumbres que existen en otros lugares como Cincinnati en USA, He aprendido

sobre los hábitos de consumo, las preferencias y comidas gastronómicas tradicionales, así como también de los lugares preferidos y mejores sitios turísticos. Me ha gustado mucho entablar conversaciones con estos chicos ya que muestran muchísimo interés sobre la cultura latina, me preguntan sobre como es la vida en general en mi ciudad, como son las fiestas y demás? igualmente yo también les pregunto sobre como es vivir en Cincinnati...viven en departamentos, cerca de la universidad e inclusive dentro de la universidad, considero que al existir tanta cercanía entre los compañeros, existen lazos de amistad muy grandes.

The knowledge I have gained has served me to understand the norms and customs that exist in other places like Cincinnati in the United States, I have learned about the norms of consumption, the preferences and traditional foods as well as the preferred places and best tourist sites. I have enjoyed the conversations with these students because they show interest in Latino culture, they asked me about what life is like in my city, what celebrations and other things. Also, I have asked them what it is like to live in Cincinnati...they live in apartments close to the university or at the university, I think that living so close to their peers encourages close friendships.

According to Deardorff, the Skills component of the process model includes the ability to “listen, observe and interpret; to analyze, evaluate and relate.”³² Although this component had fewer occurrences, specifically in the post-essays, the term confidence is repeated frequently both in the pre- and the post-essays. Students anticipate an experience that will increase their confidence in communicating in the target language in the pre-essays. Following the virtual exchange sessions, students report gains in confidence because of the treatment.

AUSJAL 13 Post-Essay: Aprendí que puedo estar más tranquila cuando aprendemos nuevos idiomas, porque

no es necesario que lo sepa a la perfección, ya que todo tiene su ritmo y que debo confiar en mi y mis habilidades.

I learned that I can be calmer while learning new languages, because it's not necessary to know it perfectly, because everything has its rhythm and that I can be confident in myself and my abilities.

AUSJAL 21 Post-Essay: Creando lazos internacionales y rompiendo las barreras del lenguaje. La experiencia intercultural que tuve en el curso de inglés fue increíble, ya que pude aprender muchas nuevas herramientas, que antes no podía desarrollar por el miedo a la oralidad y previos fracasos por el sistema de enseñanza.

Creating international links and breaking down language barriers. The intercultural experience that I had in the English course was incredible, because I could learn many new tools, that previously I could not develop due to fear of speaking and previous failures in the educational system.

With regards to Skills component, students also found that there was a positive effect on their long-term memory in post-essays, citing the fact that they will remember cultural information and conversational experiences much easier and longer due to the interactions.

AJCU 4 Post-Essay: I think that I will remember this information better than I would have if I had simply been taught it in a lecture.

There is a noted evolution from pre- to post-essays for all subjects, moving from the Attitudes category of the model towards Desired Internal and External Outcomes. Desired Internal Outcomes include behaviors and perspectives such as adaptability, flexibility, ethno-relative view and empathy.³³ Subjects described the experience of interacting with a partner from another country as a door that leads to a different culture. While experiencing their partner's culture, they can see

their own culture at the same time. This experience becomes both a window and a mirror, for as they develop increased empathy, they see themselves and develop a more ethno-relative perspective of the world. Subjects cite value in learning about their partners' cultures, and see this as a unique opportunity to dig into a culture through the lives of real people.

AJCU 18 Post-Essay: When you are interested in matters that are beyond your cultural horizon, when you interact and learn from people totally alien to your environment, you acquire a better understanding, sensitivity and judgement about global issues.

AJCU 7 Post-Essay: By learning about Colombian holidays and having to explain my own, it was a learning experience for both students. The process was incredible valuable to not reduce Colombia to a single story, but instead take into consideration the various experiences of different students and see through their perspectives.

AUSJAL 5 Post-Essay: Me mostró que cada lugar tiene algo que lo hace especial ante los ojos de alguien que no vive ahí. Este tipo de programas nos enseña también a ser mejores seres humanos capaces de entender la diversidad y compartir la nuestra.

It showed me that each place has something that makes it special to the eyes of someone who does not live there. This type of program has taught us also to be the best human beings capable of understanding diversity and sharing what it ours.

AUSJAL 14 Post-Essay: En la experiencia IDV aprendí lo importante que es entender las culturas de otros para de esa forma darle más sentido a la nuestra, cuando hablábamos con los compañeros, en cada sesión aprendíamos cosas nuevas de su cultura, lo que hace que

enriquece nuestro conocimiento, ya que no podemos hablar una lengua, de la que no conocemos absolutamente nada. Aprendí la cultura de Cincinnati, que en cada sesión nos enseñaron sus actividades y nos mostraron que somos culturas muy diferentes.

Through the IDV experience I learned the importance of understanding other cultures in order to give more meaning to our own, when we spoke to our peers in each session we learned new things about their culture, that enriched our own knowledge, because we cannot speak a language about which we know absolutely nothing. I learned the culture of Cincinnati, in each session they taught us their activities and showed us that we are different cultures.

Deardorff defines Desired External Outcomes as “Behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately to achieve one’s goals to some degree.”³⁴ In particular, students describe the manner in which the treatment increased their ability to communicate, their language fluency, and their breadth of vocabulary. As two native Spanish-speaking participants explained:

AUSJAL 13 Post-Essay: He perdido el miedo de hablar en inglés y he desarrollado mi fluidez, conocimiento y demás. Aprendí a tener más confianza en mí. Con respecto al aprendizaje de los demás puedo decir que cada persona tiene una forma de ser, con las personas que me comuniqué por este medio puedo decir que son personas muy nobles y lindas, y en su cultura y estilo de vida hay diversidad de cosas que ni siquiera imaginaba y me gustaría conocer mucho más.

I have lost the fear of speaking in English and I have developed fluency, knowledge and more. I have learned to have more confidence in myself. With respect to learning about others, I can say that each person has a way of being, with the people with whom I communicated by these means I can say that they were noble and beautiful people, and in their culture and way of life there is a diversity of things that I never imagined and that I would like to learn more about.

AUSJAL Post-Essay 11: Con este nuevo método pude entender que la mejor manera de aprender es hablando.

With this new method I came to understand that the best way to learn is by speaking.

Additionally, researchers noted subjects practicing self-evaluation of their learning, becoming more conscious of their competencies, both linguistically and culturally, reflecting on their gains and areas in need of improvement. This self-evaluation presents an example of what Liddicoat, Papdemetre, Scarino and Kohler refer to as learners engaging in a “reflective stance towards language and culture,” and the building of an acceptance of the existence of multiple perspectives.³⁵

AJCU Post-Essay 2: My first conversation with a student from Colombia made me realize that I was not as good at conversing as I thought I was. However, throughout the semester, I have become much more comfortable, much less anxious, and much more competent as a Spanish speaker.

This willingness to engage in critical analysis and evaluation of one’s performance leads to further development of intercultural competence as one is exposed to cultural norms for comparison with native culture, as well as awareness necessary to develop the skills for mediating across cultures.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

In this particular study, there was a high rate of attrition, due to two factors. Some participants did not complete either the pre- or post-essay due to absences or other reasons. Participants were instructed to supply a birth date of themselves, a relative or friend on both pre- and post-essays. However, a larger than expected number of participants did not submit the same birthdate for the pre- and the post-essay, preventing researchers from linking their essays. To avoid these issues in future studies, a small incentive for participation could be offered if funding is available. Additionally, requesting the last four digits of participants’ mobile phone numbers may be a

more reliable means of linking the pre- and post-essays.

The VDI Program continues to grow due to the support of AUSJAL and technical support at the Jesuit universities where it operates. The VDI program has not prospered at Jesuit institutions where information technology departments have positioned themselves as a hindrance to satisfactory connections for virtual exchange sessions. Information technology departments recognizing the VDI program as a serious pedagogical practice contributing to the development of both soft skills and intercultural competence have proven that partnerships among faculty, staff and administrators create unique learning experiences where students can thrive.

The success of each virtual exchange session is linked to the participation of the instructor. Faculty play a key role in the planning, preparation and facilitation of sessions. Timely communication between faculty peers to facilitate the connections of all students in both groups, observe student interaction and trouble shoot when technology fails (audio, video or connections lost), are some of the demands on instructors as they integrate virtual exchange into the curriculum. Particularly important is the planning process and consideration of the collaborative nature of the endeavor, especially while creating common learning tasks. These learning tasks follow the AIR design are key to the successful engagement of student pairs during the synchronous exchange session.

Sharing a university mission supports meaningful connections between instructors and students. Starke-Meyerring and Wilson point out in particular the partnerships that are cultivated through the collective vision of the faculty

members.³⁶ In the case of the VDI Program, the Jesuit mission shared by the participating academic institutions reinforces the social justice focus of the virtual tasks. The grassroots collaboration that faculty have created is a low-cost example of what can be achieved when Jesuit universities strategically focus on the advantages of their worldwide network of colleges and universities.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide insights into the impact of the VDI model on students' development of intercultural competence. Virtual exchange offers an inclusive curricular model for internationalization that is growing in popularity, particularly among European higher education institutions.³⁷

Additionally, the AIR task design fosters peer collaboration that encourages students to move through the Process Model of Intercultural Competence. Their peers come to represent real individuals, not just faceless strangers or statistics in the news. Students develop cultural self-awareness as they realize that a nation cannot be reduced to a single story. In this way, virtual exchange combats the globalization of superficiality,³⁸ through the deep learning, reflection and new perspectives that can result from virtual interactions of Jesuit university students across the globe. Although virtual exchange requires the effort of dedicated instructors for successful implementation, this low-cost internationalization option can support student and faculty growth in intercultural competency development and enhance the Jesuit mission of preparing students to contribute with compassion and empathy to an increasingly global society. 

Notes

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²³ Tasks were originally developed by Ceo-DiFrancesco and Mora for their students. They were adapted for this research project and utilized by all participating instructors and students.

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³⁰ Byram, *Teaching and Assessing*.

³¹ Deardorff, "Identification and Assessment," 256.

³² Deardorff, "Identification and Assessment," 256.

³³ Deardorff, "Identification and Assessment," 256.

³⁴ Deardorff, "Identification and Assessment," 256.

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