Virtual International Exchange: Access, Outcomes, and Programmatic Concerns

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ABSTRACT

This editorial provides context for the articles that appear in this special issue and brings them together thematically. We first examine how special issue authors chose to define the term 'virtual exchange' in their work and then explore key take-aways from each article in three thematic groups: access; outcomes; and programmatic concerns. Together, the articles in this special issue speak to key issues in virtual international exchange that will be important for researchers and practitioners alike to contend with as the field develops.

Keywords: virtual international exchange, access, outcomes, programmatic concerns, defining virtual exchange

The COVID-19 pandemic is often represented as a turning point for virtual approaches to international programming, including virtual exchange (e.g., Raby & Zhang, 2022; Strielkowski, 2022). However, virtual international exchange is not a new educational opportunity but rather has been used for intercultural learning since the emergence of the internet in the 1990s (O'Dowd & Dooley, 2020). Even still, the pandemic has marked a significant increase in interest in virtual exchange among international educators. With international student

mobility paused and, even now, more than two years after the pandemic's onset, restricted for an unknown amount of time, students, educators, and administrators have turned to virtual options to fill the gap in students' ability to experience the world beyond home-country borders (e.g., Fischer & Cossey, 2022; Martel, 2020; Redden, 2020). Researchers and leaders in our field have also highlighted the potential for virtual exchange to address concerns that have come to dominate discourse in international education in recent years, namely diversity, equity, and inclusion (or lack thereof) in international programming; lack of diversity in geographic location of international programs; and international education's impact on the environment (e.g., de Wit, 2016; Ficarra, 2017; George-Mwangi & Yao, 2020; Shields, 2019). However, these issues of concern are not new to the pandemic era. Instead, the pandemic likely accelerated these conversations in our field.

The purpose of this Special Issue on Virtual Exchange: Evidence and Analysis to Advance the Field in the *Journal of International Students* is to bring together contributions that use a range of methodological approaches, explore complex realities, and suggest new directions for this rapidly growing aspect of our field. This editorial brings together themes and ideas common to these articles with the intent of extending their conversations further.

What is Virtual Exchange?

When considering the articles that comprise this special issue together, a key concern relates to how authors define virtual exchange. Interestingly, not all authors adopt the same definition, signaling uncertainty and disagreement in our field regarding what constitutes virtual exchange. This situation is not wholly unexpected, given the relative newness of these programs, but moving forward it will be important for individuals working in international education, whether from the research or practice side, to come to a consensus regarding what we mean when we refer to "virtual exchange." In this special issue, some authors define "virtual exchange" in opposition to international programs that include mobility. For example, Alami et al. (2022) define virtual exchange as "an alternative form of student exchange that delivers the same benefits of traditional student mobility while utilizing more accessible tools at a much lower cost and in a safer way" (p. 58). Definitions such as this one give the impression that virtual exchange is interchangeable with mobility to the extent that both opportunities can provide students with the same benefits. Other definitions speak directly to the impression that virtual exchange is a lower cost international opportunity, ostensibly in comparison to mobility programs. For example, Poe (2022) defines virtual exchange as "a relatively low-cost online educational experience involving sustained interaction and communication between geographically separated participants using technology managed by trained facilitators" (p xx). Assertions such as this one about the cost of virtual exchange highlight the need for research that estimates exactly how much these programs cost. While virtual exchange may be less expensive compared to international mobility programs from the student perspective, virtual exchange programs certainly incur institutional and start-up

costs related to facilitator training, technology resources, and the time it takes to successfully develop and implement a virtual exchange program. It is unclear whether these definitions that refer to the cost of virtual exchange take into account these perhaps invisible costs of program development and implementation.

Other definitions of virtual exchange that authors in this special issue provide focus more intentionally on the role of technology in virtual exchange, highlighting that these international experiences are "technology mediated" (Lee et al., 2022, p. xx) or "technology-enabled" (Giralt et al., 2022, p. xx). These definitions often also emphasize that these exchanges using technology are not one-time experiences for participants, but rather "sustained over a period of time" (Baralt et al., 2022, p. xx). Definitions also highlight the role of facilitators in implementing virtual exchange. For example, both Weaver et al. (2022) and Fernández Gutiérrez et al. (2022) draw from O'Dowd's (2018) definition of virtual exchange to underscore that virtual exchange happens "under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators" (O'Dowd, 2018, p. 5). A final component of these definition is an emphasis on the inclusion of participants from at least two geographic or cultural contexts. As Baralt et al. (2022) emphasize: "[Virtual exchange] entails the use of technology to bridge students across cultural and geographic boundaries from different contexts" (p. xx).

Definitional differences aside, the articles that comprise this special issue explore various aspects of virtual exchange that have important implications for virtual exchange practice and future research in this area. These articles can be broadly grouped into three thematic categories: access; outcomes; and programmatic concerns.

ACCESS

Of note is that the four articles in this issue that ask questions about access to virtual exchange opportunities represent a variety of educational levels and contexts. Admittedly, however, the United States is overrepresented geographically in these studies. Hinshaw et al. (2022) speak to virtual exchange in primary and secondary education while Whatley et al. (2022) address the two-year, public (community college) postsecondary sector. Poe (2022) draws from data representing historically marginalized student virtual exchange participants in the four-year postsecondary sector. Finally, Alami et al. (2022) include a broad regional representation in their study, including participation from Africa, South America, the Middle East, Central Asia, and East Asia. This latter study is key in that it underscores that access challenges are not unique to a single geographic context.

In asking questions related to access, these articles provide concrete recommendations for how teachers, faculty, and others working in education administration can improve the implementation of virtual exchange programs so that they are available to a broader diversity of students. Hinshaw et al. (2022) highlight challenges that K-12 educators experience when implementing virtual exchange programming, including: technological needs of students, teachers, and

schools; mode of instruction differences across classrooms and over time; and student and teacher comfort with topics that come up during virtual exchange. Alami et al. (2022) underscore the key issue of funding for training educators to design and implement virtual exchange programs across disciplines and the concomitant need to raise awareness that virtual exchange programming is not only for language learning or the humanities. Both Whatley et al. (2022) and Poe (2022) provide implications for the design and implementation of virtual exchange programming. Virtual exchange may be unintentionally confined to specific academic programs, thus excluding portions of a student population, and educators may not adequately consider the experiences of marginalized student populations when creating and implementing virtual exchange programs. All four articles highlight the need for a comprehensive organizational approach to virtual exchange. To be successful in the long term, these programs cannot be designed and implemented only at the administrative level, nor can they be the domain of individual teachers or faculty members. All parties must work together so that virtual exchange programming is an accessible opportunity for all students over time.

OUTCOMES

Two of the articles in this special issue address questions around the outcomes of virtual exchange programs. Lee et al. (2022) depict virtual exchange as a high-impact educational practice and present results that suggest that virtual exchange has a positive relationship with students' academic outcomes, namely academic achievement (measured using grade point average [GPA]), retention, and completion. Importantly, these results were found to be stronger for students from marginalized and/or historically underrepresented backgrounds, thus providing a useful connection to studies that address issues of access to virtual exchange, highlighted previously. If, in fact, virtual exchange increases access to these same student populations, then its inclusion in any institution's portfolio of international opportunities is key in the quest to address international education's long struggle with equitable access. In a second piece that speaks to student outcomes, Devereux and Glenn (2022) focus their efforts on global learning that can happen through virtual exchange. In their data, students report increases in global perspective-taking and a related feeling of empowerment as a result of participating in virtual exchange. Importantly, these gains were reported from students on both sides of the virtual exchange, in this case, Liberia and the United States. This study underscores the importance of considering learning gains for *all* virtual exchange participants, not only those on one side of the exchange.

Taken together, these two studies invite future inquiry into the mechanisms behind the learning gains that they observe. That is, what is it about virtual exchange that promotes academic achievement and success? What components of virtual exchange programming promote global perspective-taking and empowerment? Does this learning happen similarly across educational contexts? Research that addresses questions such as these can ultimately help educators design programs that increase the likelihood of student learning and success.

PROGRAMMATIC CONCERNS

A final set of articles in this special issue addresses programmatic concerns for virtual international exchange. Giralt et al. (2022) apply pattern matching to virtual exchange program case studies from the European Union and find four general programmatic patterns: (1) virtual exchange as a means of preparing students for or following-up from physical mobility; (2) virtual exchange blended throughout physical mobility; (3) virtual exchange as a program on its own; and (4) virtual exchange as an instructional component of a course. Weaver et al. (2022) take a different approach and examine the experiences of individuals who design and implement virtual exchange programs. Specifically, this study explores how educators develop their capacity to create and lead virtual exchanges, highlighting the key role that previous lived experiences play in this process. Also taking the perspective of educator involvement in virtual exchange programming, Fernández Gutiérrez et al. (2022) use content analysis of a corpus of virtual exchanges to examine how teachers can intervene to scaffold student conversations before, during, and after these educational events. For example, instructors can provide students with a set of guidelines for synchronous virtual interaction before virtual exchange commences. These two studies, Weaver et al. and Fernández Gutiérrez et al., provide insight into the experts who guide virtual exchange programming. Finally, Baralt et al. (2022) describe the creation of a virtual exchange program for foreign language learning with a focus on the integration of multiple technological resources, sequencing of program content, collaboration and dynamics among various project partners, and challenges encountered during the project's development and implementation. The authors contribute this piece with the hope that a detailed understanding of their process of program creation is helpful to other seeking to develop scalable virtual exchange programs.

These four articles that speak to programmatic concerns in virtual exchange bring together threads of conversation around access and outcomes. For example, the four studies in this special issue that center access highlight how teachers and faculty members are a key component of virtual exchange program implementation. Drawing from their lived experiences (Weaver et al., 2022), they direct students' virtual exchange experiences (Fernández Gutiérrez et al., 2022) towards achieving specific outcomes. The ways in which educators implement programs may have important consequences to who accesses virtual exchange and, ultimately, how comfortable they feel in those experiences. Articles like Giralt et al. (2022) and Baralt et al. (2022), which outline specific approaches to virtual exchange program design, provide insight into programmatic approaches and components that can be further explored for their contribution to the gains in student outcomes observed in Lee et al. (2022) and Devereux and Glenn (2022).

CONCLUSION

Although the studies that comprise this special issue indicate that virtual exchange is far from providing the equitable access to which it aspires, these programs hold

great potential for a future, more accessible international education. Moreover, this research indicates that students stand to gain much through participation in these programs. For example, if the results from Lee et al. (2022) and Devereaux and Glenn (2022) are found to hold beyond the specific contexts of these two studies, then virtual international exchange should be considered a valuable teaching tool across educational levels, programs, and contexts. The articles included in this special issue that explore programmatic concerns for virtual exchange provide suggestions and even roadmaps for how educators can consider implementing these programs in schools, classrooms, and beyond.

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