The Virtual Global Classroom:
Development, New Tendencies and Applications

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on our relationship with technology, forcing a transformation that has been underway for some time. This change has also impacted the higher education sector and, within it, the possibilities offered by greater internationalization. This article wants to expand these initial insights, defining ICT-enabled curriculum internationalization and underlining how it connects the classroom to the world's knowledge exchange and production ecosystem, enabling both students and instructors to learn from and contribute to its richness. After a brief excursus of the history of global digital training tools and an account of the definitions offered by the literature, the characteristics of a virtual global classroom will be highlighted, underlining what makes it different from in-person training opportunities. The concepts of virtual third space and community, as well as Post-Gutenberg Learning and Superadditivity, will be used to show the advantages of virtual global classrooms in the field of social science training and how it can be, with the necessary adjustments, more than a poor substitute for in-person learning.

Keywords: Virtual Global Exchange, Virtual Third Space, Remote Learning and Teaching, Global Knowledge Ecosystem.

Introduction: The COVID boost

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on our relationship with technology, forcing a transformation that had been underway for some time but which has developed incrementally during those weeks. This change has also impacted the higher education sector and, within it, the possibilities offered by greater internationalization. The long months

without international travel accelerated the quality and frequency of digital exchanges, both real-time and asynchronous. Even the professors who were most attentive to protecting in-person exchange in institutional places found themselves working from home and collaborating through video conferencing software. Although those attempts were sometimes clumsy and not always excellent regarding the quality of the educational experience offered, each of us now understands the frustrations and the potential of global digital training.

This article intends to expand these initial insights, defining ICT-enabled curriculum internationalization, underlining how it connects the classroom to the world's knowledge exchange and production ecosystem, while enabling both students and instructors to learn from and contribute to its richness.

After a brief excursus of the history of global digital training tools and an account of the definitions offered by related literature, we will highlight the characteristics of a virtual global classroom, underlining what makes it different from in-person training opportunities. We will then focus on the advantages of virtual global classrooms in the field of social science training and how it can be, with the necessary adjustments, more than a poor substitute for in-person learning. This is based on the writer's practical experience, as she coordinates a global virtual internship program and teaches a virtual seminar class. A previous version of this article will go out soon with another publisher.

The landscape of virtual exchanges

Starting after the Second World War, distance education has expanded, along with technology. Initially this happened through the diffusion of television, and then together with the introduction of personal computers, the internet, and – more recently – smartphones, video conferences, and social networking technologies. While at the beginning the educational experience was mainly top-down, new digital tools have made it more interactive, quick, network-based, and characterized by a communal exchange. More and more researchers and students are now able to

connect with one another, exchange ideas, and facilitate live cross-border communication and projects. Expanded synchronous learning opportunities have become available for students across international borders.

Since the '90s, virtual exchanges have started to have more formal recognition, especially when players from different countries are involved. National and international organizations like the EU, United Nations, and the OECD increasingly recognized virtual exchange as a tool for promoting global competence, and a number of reports have been published underlining the benefits of this form of international exchange.[1] As a result, the early 21st century saw more and more universities offering online classes in an effort to leverage their learning management systems and open education technologies,[2] while others specifically focused their efforts towards the promotion of virtual exchanges.[3]

At the turn of the century, "in-person" student mobility reached its maximum expansion, with thousands of students crossing the national borders to study in other countries as part of a study abroad program or as part of a student exchange program. The number of international stu-

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1. In 2002, the formula Open Educational Resources (OER) was coined at UNESCO's 2002 Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries.

2. The first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) was launched in 2008, to scale access to online courses at low or no cost for students across the world (Glass et al., 2016). TerraDotta, founded in 2001, helped international educators who were managing the growing number of international students and an increasing number of study abroad programs. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), an early proponent of OER, launched MIT OpenCourseWare to provide free, open access to course materials, lectures, and resources to be used by students and educators around the world. The Open Education Consortium, originally founded in 2008 as the OpenCourseWare Consortium, promoted OER and expanded access to educational materials and increased knowledge-sharing (Veletsianos, 2016). Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 6.

3. The establishment of the SUNY COIL Center (Collaborative Online International Learning Center) in 2005, with the support from the American Council on Education (ACE), marked a turning point for the growth of virtual exchange. The center has fostered collaborative projects embedded within courses, connecting students and faculty across the globe. Another outstanding initiative was founded in 2015, The Stevens Initiative, specifically aimed to expand access to virtual exchange for young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In 2018, the European Commission launched the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange program, promoting virtual mobility opportunities for students and young professionals. And again in 2018 the Virtual Exchange Coalition was founded to support high-quality virtual exchange programs and promote integration in the curriculum. Cfr. Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 6.

dents studying at the higher education level around the world increased from 2m in 1998 (when UNESCO records began) to 6.4m in 2020.[4]

Yet, in this environment, a massive transformation was also happening. The rapid growth of blended learning, flipped classrooms, and experiential learning has become essential to the study abroad experience, pushing towards a more horizontal and integrated educational experience. The digital world was also becoming a daily experience for students, who started to expect an interaction between these technologies and their educational experience. Then, universities increasingly invested in technological infrastructure, virtual technologies, and started offering opportunities for hybrid programming and keeping connections with home universities. Courses would take place at the same time virtually and in person, taking advantage of the exchanges of global knowledge with local experience the students were having abroad. Technological advances through artificial intelligence (AI) products, like ChatGPT, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR), rapidly shift and change the tools and practices, enabling students to engage in more realistic, interactive, and immersive experiences.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s pushed this tendency even further, forcing academic institutions to find new ways of offering international experience without traveling. International educators have seen a final shift in their professional environment towards remote work, connections with communities beyond traditional mobility-based ties, participation in collaborative global virtual teams, and attendance at virtual networking and professional development opportunities. The world discovered how virtual exchanges could expand access to international education to groups that couldn't easily travel by removing barriers like travel expenses, visa restrictions, and affordable housing.

Today, a virtual exchange is defined as an online learning environment that connects groups of learners with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations in extended periods of online inter-

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4. British Council, 2024.

cultural interactions and collaboration. It is an integrated part of the student's education programs and happens under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. It allows learners to interact and collaborate in real time using various digital tools and platforms.[5]

Inside this vast definition, the literature recognizes a variety of formats that can be considered virtual exchanges: online learning, virtual mobility, virtual global internships, hyflex (hybrid-flexible) learning experiences,[6] virtual exchanges, collaborative online international learning (COIL), telecollaboration, digital enrichment of international education, digital storytelling, global learning, international student mobility, degree-seeking international students, education abroad, hybrid or blended mobility and international research collaborations.

The difference among these tools resides in the level of awareness among instructors, the level of intentionality, the level of engagement of online student services that ensure proper integration of the remote and real worlds, and explicit learning outcomes in the area of intercultural awareness and/or competency.

Indeed, new technologies can offer many opportunities to incorporate international, intercultural, and/or global elements into existing curricula without necessarily advancing internationalization's fundamental purpose of active knowledge exchange with diverse others.

Lecturing about topics with g/local connections, diversifying the authorship of required course readings, developing new modules on diverse cultural practices, and inviting international guest speakers are all forms of internationalization that have been considered as forms of inward look,[7] ways to connect with others without entering into deep experiences. Indeed, while these methods expose students to diverse ways of

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5. O'Dowd (2018).

6. These are learning experiences conducted in a physical space, typically a classroom, equipped with technology that allows two-way interaction with remote learners. They require significant awareness and training for the learning facilitators who need to manage and address the needs of two different audiences. Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024.

7. Leask, 2015.

knowing, they do not necessarily advance it and do not take full advantage of the digital world's potential.

Instead, ICT can favor outward-facing learning curricula, where the instructor intentionally designs environments that "facilitate critical, dialogic encounters amongst students, academics, and wider communities, not confined by national contexts but with g/local perspectives".[8] Global Virtual Classrooms can be an interesting tool in this realm; in the next paragraph we will explore how it should be built to reach these goals.

More generally, virtual settings can enable intercultural communication across geographical, temporal, and social boundaries. People can connect and collaborate with others from different countries, time zones, and backgrounds, thus bringing different cultures, languages, and worldviews into the classroom. This can also enhance the creativity and innovation of intercultural communication, as people can exchange and integrate diverse ideas and solutions.

Moreover, VGCs can provide access to quality learning opportunities for students who face barriers such as poverty, distance, conflict, or discrimination. As such, they can help close the global education gap by overcoming geographical, economic, and social barriers.[9] A report from the World Economic Forum highlights some examples of successful digital learning initiatives, such as the Global Learning Network, which connects students from 30 countries to work on real-world challenges, and the Global Digital Library, which provides free access to high-quality reading resources in more than 40 languages.

VGCs can also impact global climate change through a reduction of unnecessary carbon emissions that result from international travel.[10]

However, virtual global classrooms also face some challenges. The most discussed and evident is the digital divide, as the proliferation of online learning cannot reach those who have limited and unreliable ac-

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8. Wimpenny et al., 2022, p. 291.

9. World Economic Forum, 2021.

10. Helm & Guth, 2022.

cess to modern ICT. Disparities in access to personal computers and high-speed internet connectivity leave behind students in regions lacking technological infrastructure. In addition, a study by McKinsey[11] found that teachers in high-poverty schools rated remote learning as less effective than their peers in low-poverty schools and that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to disengage from online learning. For some, virtual global learning serves to perpetuate already-existing power structures and social hierarchies.[12] Moreover, recent evidence that participation in virtual international exchange doubles the likelihood that a student will study abroad draws into question the extent to which virtual programs may actually reduce carbon emissions in the long term.[13]

With the increased competition in global higher education, other concerns are related to the quality and accreditation of online education. As universities worldwide increasingly began offering online courses, criticisms of the marketization and commercialization of internationalization have become more strident, with widespread concerns that it is being dominated more than ever before by revenue generation with a minor focus on the learning experience.

The quality of online instruction would then be at risk. Online teaching and learning require skills and strategies that differ from face-to-face instruction. Teachers need to design and facilitate effective online activities, assessments, and feedback, while students need to develop self-regulation, motivation, and collaboration skills. Measuring and evaluating the learning outcomes of virtual global classrooms can be challenging, especially when they involve intercultural competence and global citizenship.

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11. World Economic Forum, 2021.

12. Bali, 2014; Knight, 2023; Schueller & Sahin, 2022; Whatley et al., 2022. For example, "in international and higher education, the often-uncontested privileging of English—or, more specifically, the privileging of white, Anglophone English—is particularly salient, and the field of international virtual exchange (IVE) is no exception… According to the Stevens Initiative (2022), 77.3% of 2,470 reported IVE programs were offered only in English, 20.5% were offered in English and another language, and a mere 2.2% were offered only in a language that was not English." Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 144.

13. Lee et al., 2022.

Valid and reliable tools and methods are needed to assess these complex and multidimensional outcomes, and this has not been the rule, especially for the experiences born right after COVID.

Therefore, virtual global classrooms can be a powerful tool to address inequality in education, but they also require careful design, implementation, and evaluation to ensure that they meet the needs and expectations of all learners.

Virtual global classrooms as a new educational environment

The physical movement across borders to experience other cultures and engagement with the local reality have traditionally been viewed as vital components of meaningful cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. In addition, proximity to other students has been seen as an essential element for creating a thriving intellectual and research environment.[14]

For this reason, remote, distant, or virtual classes have long been reduced to a secondary role within the field of internationalization, associating it with the negation of place. "It is neither here (at home), nor there (abroad)".[15] A growing body of literature, though, underlines how the inability to pinpoint one fixed or geographically bounded place can represent a unique opportunity within the field of digital internationalization. An exploration of its potential, therefore, requires reconsidering the meaning of place and recognizing that, under specific circumstances, remote virtual classrooms promote a more diverse, fluid, and multidimensional knowledge creation, where participants become used to dealing with the ambiguity and complexity that prevails in today's world.

We will discuss three features that distinguish global virtual classrooms from in-person international learning: the digital new space, the possibility to form virtual communities, and to achieve post-Gutenberg learning and superadditivity.

14. Hawawini, 2011.

15. Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024.

Digital place: Here or There?

In order for digital forms of internationalization to begin to hold their rightful place alongside others, educators and leaders should recognize the unique ways that students experience a sense of place online.[16]

In a globalized and digital world, the meaning of place is becoming ambiguous. We are used to environments that are largely indistinguishable despite their different geographical locations: non-places like shopping malls, airport shops, and fast-food chains.[17] That is why some authors call for a reconceptualization of place as the environment where interactions happen and are weaved, more than as necessarily rooted in a physical location.[18] For Massey (1994), a globalized sense of place is open and unbounded by national borders; also, it is flexible and linked to outside environments. Virtual global places are unique and ever-changing environments, composed of multiple identities, where the online space is co-created by the interactions among the participants' own physical locations and the objects and people that reside within them, as well as the thoughts, opinions, and ideas that the participants bring with them. The virtual place is, therefore, permeable and hybrid in nature, merging both the physical world and the online platform, neither of which can be separated from the experience.[19] The blending of public and private spaces is a unique feature of the online environment, allowing for the movement of participants within and between places.[20]

That is also why some authors like to define the virtual space as

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16. Ibidem p. 104.

17. Augé (2023).

18. Massey (1994).

19. Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 107.

20. "A student participating in a virtual exchange, for example, is impacted by their own physical space: the lighting of the room, the arrangement of furniture, outside noises they hear through their window as well as the smell of dinner being prepared in their kitchen. At the same time, they are also immersed in an online place, one that is dominated by a screen, but also includes sensory inputs: views of their peers in their own physical places, as well as sounds, both intentional, such as a comment or discussion, and those less intentional sounds, such as a dog barking in the background." Ibidem, p. 107.

a Third Space[21] where the "real material world" (which comprises cultural, social, political, economic, and other contextual factors that influence the local perspectives participants bring to knowledge exchange) is continually reinterpreted by the virtual community. Indeed, thanks to ICT-enabled curriculum internationalization, participants co-create "hybridized cultural norms and practices that facilitate equitable knowledge exchange",[22] socially negotiating new ways of perceiving and representing their shared reality.

The personal space becomes more open as students share their stories, work, and study with someone living on the other side of the world.

Virtual community

Virtual third spaces can then be the place where a real community of shared norms and values, rules, roles, beliefs and ideals can emerge. The digital environment, indeed, offers unique opportunities for participants to construct imagined communities,[23] where there is a manifested "sense of community, group climate, mutual trust, social identity, and group cohesion".[24] Norton and Toohey suggest that "in imagining ourselves allied with others across time and space, we can feel a sense of community with people we have not yet met and with whom we may never have any direct dealings".[25] Hilli et al. note that such places "support hybrid or fluid forms of becoming and being in, with and for the world".[26]

When online, participants can also experience new freedom in expressing themselves, their opinions, and their identities or even build a new community with peers in a way that would not be possible for stu-

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21. The concept of Third Space was originated by post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha who proposed it as "a new productive space in which the historical dimensions and identities of cultures are challenged when two cultures meet" (Lin, 2014, p. 45).

22. Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 78.

23. Anderson, 1991.

24. Kreijns et al., 2022, p. 141.

25. Norton and Toohey, 2011, p. 422.

26. Hilli et al. 2019, p. 78.

dents having their in-person study abroad experience.

It is not uncommon for international students, indeed, to find themselves unable to cope with intercultural discomfort in their host communities. They may enter a panic zone, a state of fear that blocks their learning, and "retreat to superficial or stereotypical interpretations, dismiss or demean the 'other' as irrelevant or insignificant, or defer to authorities who tell them what to think".[27] Similar difficulties in creating meaningful intellectual and intercultural exchange can also happen with international students who are allowed to live and study within a bubble of familiarity, remaining on the economic and cultural periphery of their host communities and never positioning themselves as "contributing members" of that community.[28]

These limits of international education could be overcome online as connecting via the Internet blurs the distinction between "domestic" or "international". Everyone participating in the encounter may consider themselves to be, in some sense, at home. Also, interlocal knowledge exchange repositions all participants as both home and international learners. Digital interactions can be perceived as a new safety zone that transcends national borders or the "real" community's opinions. When the roles of host and guest are erased, and students maintain a connection to home's physical security, they may be more likely to experience international dialogue in their learning zone, and a greater sense of belonging can emerge.

It is, for example, possible to discuss opinions and perspectives on topics in ways that would not be normally permitted in one's own physical space.[29] Judgment is suspended as participants cannot completely grasp all the factors that built up an opinion expressed during an online session.

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27. Jurasek, 1995, in Ogden, 2007, p. 46.

28. Ibidem.

29. A student stated, "I felt like I'm in a country where it's free; we have rights to talk, to discuss things, to have an opinion that's radical in your country." Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 112.

Post-Gutenberg Learning and Superadditivity

ICT-enabled global curricula also offer new ways for diverse and geographically dispersed people to depict, categorize, manipulate, and co-create new knowledge.

When used at their full potential, virtual global classrooms take advantage not only of what is available inside the virtual community but also of what each participant can bring into the community from their personal vantage points. Thanks to digital technology, news, scholarship, and cultural productions from around the world can be accessed in an instant via the internet. Guest lectures from scholars and fellow students in other parts of the world can be carried out relatively easily via email, message boards, video conferencing, social media, etc.

However, an additional component makes this environment able to produce new forms of knowledge. Web searches from different locations will show different results, opening new perspectives that instructors have to utilize in class. This means increasing the number and diversity of explanations and representations of topics, which in a VGC can be seen in different contexts or via other points of view.

Digital ICTs broaden students' access to divergent ideas and to the people who possess them. Differences in gender, race, nationality, religion, and other identity-related perspectives might interact with those tools, producing subtly but meaningfully different interpretations that could lead to significantly different combinations of ideas and innovative solutions. Page (2007) dubbed this phenomenon the superadditivity of diversity, and it is one of the main benefits of internationalization.[30] Virtual exchanges increase these possibilities exponentially.

Criss-crossing the web on a topic and bringing the results in class

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30. "Superadditivity means that the whole of a cognitively diverse group of people, in terms of their ability to analyze and generate solutions to complex problems, is greater than the sum of its individual parts" (Landorf et al., 2018, pp. 54–55). When cognitively diverse teachers and learners apply their different knowledge and skills to shared questions and challenges, they often combine parts of their different ideas to create new ideas." In Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 74.

permits accessing multiple perspectives and many alternative points of connection, as opposed to only reading a single book on the same topic. Spiro and DeSchryver (2006) recommend taking advantage of the Web's hypertext paradigm to design "Post-Gutenberg learning" that develops the "Post-Gutenberg mind."

Moreover, the results and the materials that come from virtual exchanges will be complex and non-linear. The same is true of the web, which is characterized by a higher level of unpredictability.[31] Surviving in this environment means that students and teachers have to deal with ill-structured problems, where concepts don't always show up in exactly the same way, where parameters are less manipulable, and there is a level of uncertainty about which concepts, rules, and principles are necessary for the solution or how they are organized and which solution is best.[32] Learning in ill-structured domains demands nonlinear thinking, i.e., the ability to expand thinking in multiple directions and discern links between seemingly disconnected ideas and perspectives (Spiro & Jehng, 1990; Spiro et al., 1987).

VGCs in social sciences

Virtual global classes can have an interesting application in social science courses. Students who want to become managers, entrepreneurs, or public officers have a fundamental need to learn how to deal with global reality. This means not only becoming used to collaborating with people from different cultural and national backgrounds but also knowing how to approach complex problems and solutions that are often neither clear nor definitive. Furthermore, given the growth of

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31. "The structure of the World Wide Web is nonlinear. It is based on Hypertext Transfer Protocol—the "http" at the beginning of every website address—a nonlinear, nonhierarchical, borderless linking paradigm that fuels the Web's power and potential. Trillions of hyperlinks allow users to crisscross the Web's network of knowledge through nonlinear leaps from one page or object to another. If you have ever spent hours on the Web "going down a rabbit hole," i.e., following link to link in a seemingly random pattern, then you have experienced the Web's power to facilitate nonlinear connection making." Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 80.

32. Jonassen, 1997, p. 65.

"hybrid" jobs and virtual work groups, getting used to the dynamics of digital communities is essential.

Digital pedagogy is particularly relevant for "a globally networked world in which knowledge is created, shared, and remixed across digital networks." It also prepares "students to live, work, and take political action in such a world" (MLA, 2020, par. 1).

In VGC, indeed, future leaders in politics, business, and economy have the opportunity to contend with intercultural and cognitive complexity and, at the same time, deal with the ambiguity and complexity inherent in the problems they study.

Looking at the skills that can be developed thanks to global virtual classes, the instructor's role in this realm seems to be the turning point, as intentionality and guidance in ICT-enabled learning environments are essential.

In the digital age, curriculum internationalization is not just about what students know; it's also about what students make and do with what they know.

By engaging in dialogue and joint projects on global issues, such as human rights, environment, and peace, students can learn to appreciate diverse perspectives and experiences, thus developing intercultural competence and global citizenship.

Most real-world economic and business domains are a mix of ill-structured and well-structured problems. The human mind likes to think in straight lines, but the economic and political world does not operate in a linear fashion. We are surrounded by nonlinear phenomena that neither develop nor progress in direct or unidirectional ways. Instead, they need to be approached in a multidimensional way.[33]

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33. "For example, if the problem of predicting and mitigating COVID-19's spread had been tackled only by microbiologists, we might never have understood the impacts of air travel and indoor air quality on infection rates. What's more, if information about the problem and experimental solutions had not been shared across national borders, we might still be struggling to develop a vaccine and deal with the pandemic's impacts on the global economy." Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 80.

For this reason, students of economic disciplines can gain interesting skills if adequately accompanied in a global virtual classroom, which is intrinsically characterized by a higher level of uncertainty. Using the web landscape, learners have to combine and recombine parts of different ideas into a complex whole and present them to various digital global learners. This form of synthetic thinking can be stimulated by divergent keyword searches, serendipitous discovery, and multimedia sharing.[34]

In today's interconnected world, many economic challenges have a local and global component. As such, they are too complex for any single person, group, discipline, or institution to understand or to solve by themselves. Social Science students engaged in global virtual classrooms can generate synergetic learning and knowledge production outcomes, taking advantage of the many "places" that are part of the virtual community. Thanks to the interactions with other students located in other parts of the world, participants can easily connect with the "world's knowledge and learning 'ecosystem'",[35] sharing ideas that are needed in other parts of the system and gaining new insights. The diverse and distant others interacting in a VGC can help students look at things differently, collect new ideas, and collaboratively construct new knowledge across borders.

Practitioners can leverage the unique virtual global classroom to help students bridge their physical and online places through activities that invite students to share objects in their physical environment with the group.[36] Rather than seeing the physical distance between students as a barrier, instructors may leverage this geographical separation as an occasion for performance, as a stage for participants to construct an imagined community based on possibility and potential. This can be done through activities where students are asked to move beyond their lived realities

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34. Cabrera & Cabrera, 2019.

35. Hawawini, 2011, p. 5.

36. "Yet, it is also important to be mindful of individual preferences and different perceptions toward privacy. Giving students the option to turn on their cameras and share their personal spaces without requiring them to do so will provide them with agency when developing their sense of digital place." Woodman T. C., Whatley M., C. R. Glass C. R., Digital, 2024, p. 80 p. 108/109.

to consider an imagined future and their roles within it or through more playful approaches, where students might construct imagined identities through avatars.

An example would be to ask students to share stories they take daily from their context, being immersed in "their place" about local economic and business context, successful business ideas and practices, as well as government policies and then recombine this knowledge in the digital environment. These kinds of activities create open-ended discussions and encourage personalization and storytelling that can help cultivate emerging ideas and provide opportunities for networking now and in the future.

VGCs can foster intercultural competence and global citizenship by learning how to become a global worker and which rules prevail in that setting. Working remotely has its dynamics, values, and practices, and communities have to be developed specifically for that context.

Learning how to interact online with global peers and with authorities is essential: how to conduct a work project with participants spread throughout the world and with different time zones and daily habits; how to rely on English as a working language used in many ways and with different accents, and learn to simplify the vocabulary so to help no native English speakers in understanding the debate and feeling comfortable to contribute; how to conduct a business meeting online, give feedback, opinions, know when to interrupt, and how to create space for everyone to express their opinion; learn to master the technology and be able to add features cooperating with software developers that can facilitate digital global meetings.

Virtual work implies a new kind of manager, who has to create a virtual community and contrast the feeling of isolation and demotivation that can easily be connected with distance working. New leadership techniques have to be developed, especially when the participants come from different cultural settings. In global virtual classrooms, different interaction styles can be present; how participants conceive and promote power distance, individual expression, assertive behavior, and reaction

to uncertainty can vary deeply. The lack of non-verbal clues and spontaneous interactions complicates the picture in online communication. Small misunderstandings can be amplified and cause barriers to effective intercultural communication. Non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice, can help convey emotions, intentions, and feedback. However, these cues may be missing, distorted, or misinterpreted in a virtual setting. For example, a smile can mean different things in different cultures, such as happiness, politeness, or embarrassment. Without seeing the person's face, it may be hard to understand the meaning behind the smile.

Students attending VGCs can observe the instructor's method for creating and maintaining a shared third space, promoting diverse opinions and identity development, creating synergies among diverse perspectives, and seeing what works better in that environment.

Getting used to the complexity and ambiguity of that environment requires students to develop self-confidence and self-knowledge; both qualities are essential for tomorrow's business and political leaders.

Conclusions

As we have seen throughout this text, one of the main benefits of virtual global classrooms is the ability to promote intercultural understanding. A social science student increasingly needs to master this skill, given that it is likely that during their career they will be confronted with cultural diversity, both inside and outside their company or nation.

Yet, in Virtual Global Classrooms, as with any kind of internationalization of curricula, there is the risk of allowing students "to remain comfortably situated on the veranda [as voyeurs]",[37] without promoting genuine connection and reciprocity.

This could also fail one of the main advantages of this tool, the promotion of equal participation. The notion of a digital Third Space has indeed been criticized by authors like Potter and McDougall, who un-

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37. Ogden 2008, p. 50.

derlined how its supporters ignore "the material circumstances, … the economic imperatives of screen ownership or the political engagements in the (re)production and (re)-imagining of the world onscreen".[38]

We should then always consider that interlocal students may live and learn in different environments where under-resourced, inequitable, unjust, and/or colonialist national and international frameworks can influence their perspectives and access to necessary technology. This can be particularly true in partnerships that involve Global North and Global South, but also in more urban or rural contexts in light of existing power relations or patterns of cultural dependency.

That is why, as we have tried to demonstrate in this paper, VGCs require careful design, implementation, and evaluation to ensure that they meet the needs and expectations of all learners. Facilitators have to be trained to address such issues within the digital environment to provide a safe and supportive place for all participants.

To avoid any form of virtual voyeurism, digital ICTs can open up a Third Space within which teachers can address postcolonial hierarchies and asymmetrical relations of domination that also exist in that environment: for example, selecting discussion topics that are aware of hegemonic structures and the different intellectual, emotional, and socio-cultural positionings of Global South-North students.

Making VGC really inclusive also requires attentive technology work. International institutions will need to partner with tech developers to build platforms tailored to their needs and that promote deeper communication for international exchange. This way, virtual global interaction can be not just a "poor man's substitute"[39] but foster virtual exchange experiences in transformed ways.

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38. Potter and McDougall (2017), p. 44.

39. Ibidem, p. 140.

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About the author

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