Leveraging intercultural dialogue and collaborative learning to promote interpersonal and patient care competencies

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Abstract

This paper describes the virtual exchange (VE) between universities in the U.S. and in the West Bank, Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt). The VE aimed at developing students' interpersonal and patient health care practitioner communication skills through an intercultural dialogue framework. With this objective in mind, the program was designed to employ elements of both intercultural dialogue and team-based approaches to VE. Over the course of four weeks, students and facilitators met weekly via Zoom. During these live sessions, 26 students within their teams were engaged in a number of activities to share and learn about each other's identities and cultural perceptions of mental health and practiced intercultural dialogue communication skills. Students also had to work collaboratively to explore different mental health case studies and how they are perceived within their communities through local interviews. The VE took into consideration the sociopolitical context of the students living under occupation, creating space for the participants to learn about one another's daily lived reality including engaging in ad hoc dialogues on unexpected events happening in one of the countries. Data was collected through students' reflections. Thematic analysis of the reflections revealed that the students reported interpersonal skills development and a culturally enriching experience for both the U.S. and West Bank, oPt students. Based on the findings a number of practical implications were drawn, including having a

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flexible program plan, facilitators meeting on a regular basis during the implementation phase and collecting students' feedback throughout the program.

1. Introduction

In February 2023, a collaboration was initiated between a university in the West Bank and U.S.-based partner to collaborate on a virtual exchange (VE). Faculty members from both universities engaged in synchronous Zoom meetings to construct a four-week collaborative framework based on shared learning objectives set to commence in mid-March 2023. Thirteen bachelor's students from the oPt university, enrolled in an English for Medicine course, volunteered for this VE project for partial course credit. Concurrently, their counterparts at the U.S. university, majoring in Human Development & Family Studies and nursing, were studying mental health interventions. At the program's onset, students were placed in 6 groups – one group of six and five groups of four – and utilized both synchronous and asynchronous communication methods for collaboration, focusing on teamwork and intercultural dialogue. Over a four-week period, students engaged in weekly Zoom meetings with Human Development & Family Studies faculty from the Northeast Pa University, the Language Center and the Virtual Exchange department from the oPt university. In these live sessions, team members participated in various activities to promote positive team dynamics and intercultural communication. These activities included the oPt university's Intercultural Dialogue Framework for VE-COIL curricula.

Dialogue-based VEs have proven effective in addressing divisive and geopolitical issues, fostering mutual understanding, and reducing stereotypes. For instance, Bruneau et al. (2021) demonstrated through pre- and post-exchange surveys that such exchanges promote meaningful interpersonal connections and help participants reassess preconceived notions about others. This VE incorporated activities specifically designed to encourage direct, structured dialogue and cultural exchange. Students participated in tasks that emphasized sharing personal and cultural perspectives, enabling them to better understand and appreciate diverse experiences. For example, the "Active Listening" activity facilitated deeper engagement with peers' perspectives, fostering empathy and breaking down interpersonal barriers in alignment with Bruneau et al.'s findings.

While some activities chosen for this VE focused on promoting critical thinking, empathy, and collaborative problem solving (such as reflective journaling), other activities (such as "a day in the life") aimed at building trust and fostering engagement within the groups. All these activities are part of the oPt University's VE intercultural dialogue framework and are important elements of a successful VE experience that are necessary in creating an inclusive, respectful, and engaging dialogue environment (Bell et al., 2016), and deepen understanding of social issues.

Complementing the live interactions, teams also worked together asynchronously on assignments that aligned with the discussion topics of the live sessions. Alongside these collaborative tasks, students maintained weekly self-reflection journals to document their learning experiences. The program concluded with a final self-reflective assessment by the students. A thematic analysis was then conducted to evaluate the overall impact and outcomes of the VE.

2.   Objectives

The collaboration aimed to achieve several objectives, with some specific to each group and others shared between both. For the oPt students, the main objective was to practice English, both written and spoken, within the context of their medical studies and to gain confidence in using English. Shared objectives included acquiring an understanding of mental health disorders and their perceptions in both the oPt and the U.S., developing practical skills essential for patient care and human services such as active listening and showing empathy, while comparing regional approaches to patient care. Students were also expected to learn about each other's countries, traditions, and cultures through cross-cultural dialogue, and to enhance their critical thinking and soft skills, including time management, problem-solving, empathy, and leadership.

3.   Context

3.1.   Participants

Participants for this VE included thirteen students from both universities in the West Bank, oPt and the U.S. The students from the oPt, whose native language is Arabic, were pursuing a bachelor's degree in medicine. These students were taking a required credit-bearing class in English for Medicine (University English 2). The thirteen students from the U.S. were also pursuing a bachelor's degree,

studying Human Development & Family Studies and nursing. The U.S.-based students were required to engage in the VE, while the Palestine-based students voluntarily joined for partial course credit.

Despite the surface-level differences that might seem to exist between those two courses, they shared a core objective, which is to develop students' interpersonal and health care practitioner communication competencies. This shared goal allowed for the creation of a VE that provided mutual benefits to students from both universities.

3.2. Course coordination

The VE was coordinated and facilitated by a team of one faculty member per university as well as the VE coordinator from the West Bank, oPt university. The team met over the course of two months before the start of the VE. Those meetings aimed to thoroughly plan and design the course plan and activities for the VE. The synchronous meetings were facilitated by the team. To design a curriculum that cultivated an inclusive and brave space for sharing ideas and engaging in dialogue, the team integrated an intercultural dialogue framework developed by the oPt university. To ensure students' anonymity, no names were used in the data analysis.

3.3. Background

The VE occurred over four weeks beginning in mid-March 2023. This time frame also coincided with the beginning of Ramadan. This gave the U.S. students that were not familiar with the traditions of Ramadan the opportunity to learn about it first-hand. This VE also occurred against the backdrop of the occupation of the West Bank, oPt. The occupation became a key component of the VE as there was a massacre in the city where the oPt was located the day before one of the meetings was to occur. The faculty made the decision to continue with the planned synchronous meeting. Blockades around the city where the university is located gave the students and faculty a unique opportunity to have an open discourse about what an occupation is and what it means to the students and their families in that region as well as giving the oPt students and faculty support during that difficult time.

4. Project design

The program was designed to achieve the above-mentioned objectives for both groups of students. With that in mind, the team started holding planning meetings weeks before the start of the program. During these meetings a shared course plan was created with activities and assessment strategies

that achieved the objectives of the program and met the administrative requirements for both universities. A number of decisions had to be made before the start of the program, including what activities to use, which platform to choose, and what kind of deliverables would best achieve our goals and meet our needs. It was decided that since everyone has Google, the main platform for this collaboration would be Google Classroom. Additionally, technology that was used during synchronous meetings included Padlet, and WhatsApp was used to facilitate the students' communication with one another.

One of the main decisions that needed to be taken was the overarching theme of the program that would tie the objectives, the activities, and the deliverables together. After careful consideration, it was decided that mental health should be a topic of discussion during the VE. This decision was made due to the apparent need to shed more light on this topic in the oPt (Marie et al., 2016). The VE was developed within the intercultural dialogue framework developed by the oPt university which was designed to ensure all group members developed strong team dynamics and trust among team members. This framework was particularly important with this VE because of the sensitivity of the topic of mental health and cultivating a safe space to discuss the topic authentically and equitably (Dangmei, 2016). This framework includes an integration of group activities from the beginning and throughout the experience designed to enhance team dynamics and support students' practical experience of using facilitation dialogue tools. This framework included both asynchronous and synchronous individual and team activities including self-reflections, with different team members facilitating each session who would be responsible for ensuring everyone was included and heard during the meeting and to summarize the main points of the meeting. Teams were also asked to do small intercultural activities within their remote communication platform (WhatsApp) to continue to learn about their partners and their own communication styles through the exchange.

Table 1 demonstrates week by week breakdown of tasks, activities and assignments done during the VE, followed by an explanation of some of the activities done.

Table 1. VE week by week breakdown

	Session	Assignment
Week 1	Introduction – project overview Expectations, concerns Icebreaker's activities – A day in a life, active listening	Read provided material on mental health.
	Country Trivia: find a question to ask another person in the group in order to better understand how to work well with each other. Also find something to share about your own context that you think could be useful for the others to know. Weekly Journal: Write your first weekly journal entry reflecting on your first impression about the program, what are excited/not excited for and what did you learn from this week's trivia activity?	
Week 2	Identity activity (components to your identity). Share introductory materials on mental health conditions, e.g. depression, PTSD, anxiety for following weeks activities.	Case study of different patient care challenges – read the provided case studies, work on how you would approach the problem (what social, environmental factors would you consider? What questions would you ask? etc.), and how does your own cultural values affect how you approached the case studies.
	Country Trivia: find a question to ask another person in the group in order to better understand how to work well with each other. Also find something to share about your own context that you think could be useful for the others to know. Weekly Journal: Write your weekly journal entry reflecting on how different parts of your own identity impact the way you approach certain things in life. What did you learn from this week's Country Trivia?	
Week 3	Case study of different patient care challenges.	Ask 1-2 community members 'How is mental health (depression, anxiety, PTSD) viewed in your community?' – short reflection and basic demographic info about the interviewees (confidentiality).
	Country Trivia: find a question to ask another person in the group in order to better understand how to work well with each other. Also find something to share about your own context that you think could be useful for the others to know. Weekly Journal: Write your weekly journal entry reflecting on how cultural differences affect the way medical professional might approach the same case study. What did you learn from this week's Country Trivia?	
Week 4	Mental health – how is it viewed in each country?	Read provided material on strength-based approach.
	Country Trivia: find a question to ask another person in the group in order to better understand how to work well with each other. Also find something to share about your own context that you think could be useful for the others to know. Final reflection paper – students reflect on the whole VE experience, look back at their weekly reflection entries, and country trivia activity from each one of the weeks then reflect on how their view, opinions, knowledge, etc. have changed throughout the experience.	

4.1. Week 1

During the first synchronous meeting the students completed a "Day in the Life" activity that is part of the intercultural dialogue framework. Students were placed in bi-national teams (four teams of four and two teams of five) and would meet with the same group each week. Students were tasked with imagining what their international group members' average day is like from morning to evening, what they eat, type of transportation they take, their hobbies, etc. Then the group members would share what they got wrong and right about their day.

The groups then did an active listening activity with guidelines on active listening. The students were asked to think of a current (or recent) challenge they faced in their life and would like to find clarity on. The challenge needed to be something they were comfortable discussing and sharing with their peers. It could be a student-related challenge, a personal one, a question they are struggling with, or anything currently occupying their mind for which they would benefit from some help. The task was to each take turns in sharing their challenges where their partner listens actively, without judgment, making assumptions, or offering advice. The students were then given the following prompts in the chat box:

- 1st stage: Speaker speaks / Listener listens in silence [2min].
- 2nd stage: Speaker speaks / Listener listens and can ask questions [2min].
- 3rd stage: Speaker stops / Listener reflects back what they heard and perceived (verbal and nonverbal) [2min].
- 4th stage: Conversation continues and the Listener plays the role of a sounding board by helping the speaker find a solution or a better understanding of the issue [2min].

Then, students switched roles and repeated the activity. Both sets of students were given reading materials on mental health to be read outside of the synchronous meetings. The students were also assigned country trivia. The country trivia's aim was to find a question to ask another person in the group in order to better understand how to work well with each other. In addition, each week each student was asked to write a reflection. For the first week, the students were asked to "reflect" on their first impressions of the program, what they are excited/not excited for and what they learned from this week's trivia activity.

4.2. Week 2

During the second synchronous session, the faculty members did a short lecture on common mental health diagnoses and their symptoms. After the lecture, the students were assigned case studies where as a small group they had to meet asynchronously to determine which mental health diagnosis is being described. This week's assignment opened up the discussion of mental health in each country. During this meeting the students were assigned to interview a person in their community or family to discuss their views on mental health in their respective countries. This gave the students an opportunity to apply the active listening skills they were learning in their group meetings to the way they conducted their interviews.

4.3. Week 3

During the third meeting, the findings of the interview project were discussed with guided prompts in breakout rooms among their team. This led to a broader discussion of the similarities and differences in dealing with mental health in each culture. In the West Bank, oPt, mental health is not typically discussed and there are not a lot of therapists or doctors that focus on mental health as it was not viewed as necessary.

4.4. Week 4

Prior to the fourth synchronous meeting, there was a change in circumstances in the oPt. A blockade had been erected and a raid conducted that hindered students from moving about the city and resulted in the execution of over ten martyrs. The faculty decided to meet but rather than discuss what was scheduled (strengths-based approach) the three decided to focus on discussions regarding the occupation, the raid and blockade. The three faculty believed that it was important to take this as an opportunity to relate what they are learning in the VE to their lived experiences and to normalizing discussing the occupation and how it is impacting the students. This discussion led to a discussion of religion and how faith and family are key components to the oPt students and their sense of resilience in extraordinary circumstances. This was the final synchronous meeting of the VE so there was also time spent at the end receiving feedback on key takeaways and recommendations the students had from the experience.

4.5.   Week 5

The final week of the VE was wrapped up asynchronously. Reflections were completed during each of the week's collaborations, in addition to a final reflection at the end of the VE program.

5.   Evaluation and discussion of outcomes

The data collected from students through their reflections were analyzed using thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke method (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis revealed two main themes, the first one was related to interpersonal skills development and the second to mental health and patient care competencies.

The first theme, interpersonal skills development, manifested in many ways in the collected data. For students participating in the VE, it was an eye-opening experience that allowed them to get to know each other's culture and break previously formed stereotypes. This is evident in the below quote from one of the students:

> "The virtual exchange was very eye-opening to me, especially coming from a small town where there is an extreme lack of diversity, and I have never been exposed to any type of middle eastern culture."

The VE has also been a culturally enriching experience for both the U.S. and West Bank, oPt students. The following quote illustrates how taking part in this VE project has led to a greater understanding of the oPt culture.

> "It was a privilege to get to know the people from that country. I never actually knew much about their culture, country, way of life, etc."

This has led students to develop skills to better understand how to deal with someone from a different background and culture, as evident in the following quote.

> "While working on the activities, I realized that there were so many ways in which we were different, but at the same time are similar. This made me realize that we can come to conclusions despite our differences if we listen to each other's point of view."

Moreover, the VE has helped in boosting students' self-confidence and language skills. One student wrote:

> "Students also get to experience other countries, they can master the local language, develop their self-confidence in students and help prepare themselves for university.

This was more specific to the non-native English language speakers as they had to carry out the exchange program using English. A number of the students were hesitant about taking part in the VE due to their lack of confidence in their language skills, and by the end of the program those students expressed an increase in their confidence to use English to communicate with other students.

The second theme that emerged is mental health and patient care competencies. One of the main outcomes of the VE exchange was raising awareness on mental health, which relates directly to the objectives of the course and the VE. Shedding more light on the importance of mental health and how it is viewed in each culture was very important, especially to the oPt students as the following quote reveals how mental health is overlooked in their culture.

> "I was motivated when we talked about mental illnesses because I remembered a bad experience with my cousin, and also the experiences of many people with mental illnesses. I felt very sad, and I felt angry because society does not embrace these cases."

Another outcome of the VE was highlighted under these themes: students increased understanding of the importance of patient care competencies, especially those that relate to mental health. The following quote demonstrates this idea:

> "I now think that in order to work with patients that have mental health issues i need to listen to that patient carefully and be empathetic."

A final theme that emerged in the data analysis was related to using the intercultural dialogue framework in planning and facilitating this project. Students agreed that the course activities and tasks were engaging online and offline. They have also emphasized learning through the intercultural communication process established in the VE. This is exemplified in the following quote:

> "This program was constructed perfectly and the activities were enjoyable and facilitating to the communication process but a little randomizing for the groups would be more interactive and a student may get to know more people."

The above quote also highlights one of the main recommendation students made to make their experience in the virtual better, which is to mix the group members during the course of the VE so that they can get to know other participants and learn from each other's culture and traditions.

6.   Conclusions and implications

This practice report offers important takeaways and practical recommendations to inform the design and implementation of future VEs, with a particular focus on trust, adaptability and skill development. Most important was creating a space where trust could be built. This was vital for two reasons: first, the students and faculty were living under an occupation and that needed to be addressed with sensitivity and understanding of their lived realities. Second, mental health is a sensitive topic for many cultures; in order to open discussions regarding mental health, trust had to be established between the classmates. This sense of trust among the groups was facilitated based on the utilization of the dialogue based VE techniques.

The findings also highlighted the importance of a flexible and adaptive VE program design. Although it is essential to have a plan for VE meetings, unexpected circumstances may require adjustments, such as when students needed to discuss current events related to the occupation during one of the sessions. This aligns with existing research on the importance of responsive pedagogy in VEs, which highlights the value of maintaining relevance to participants' lived experiences (O'Dowd, 2021). Regular briefing meetings for the facilitators throughout the implementation of the VE were essential in making any adjustments to the plan to better meet students' evolving needs. The importance of a facilitators' debriefing meeting has been established in VE (Helm & van der Velden, 2021; Roqueta-Vall-Ilosera et al., 2024).

Moreover, having students work on small tasks during the week leading up to the live session is key in students' continual development of team dynamics and staying engaged. This finding aligns with prior studies emphasizing the role of scaffolding in collaborative online learning environments (Turula et al., 2019). Additionally, continuing to seek feedback from the students throughout the entire collaboration is key in the success of the collaboration and in ensuring meeting students' needs, a practice that resonates with learner-centered educational models (Vygotsky, 1978).

Finally, results revealed that a dialogue-based VE framework with collaborative and interpersonal teamwork is an effective way to promote key soft skills critical for patient care (such as active listening and empathy). These findings open avenues for future research into integrating dialogue-driven VE in medical education to improve interpersonal and communications skills. The broader implications of this work suggest that VE can serve as a model for addressing power dynamics and fostering mutual understanding in educational settings affected by geopolitical tensions.

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