

Capitalizing on Gen Z students' interests and motivations to develop Global Citizenship Education in VEs

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Abstract

The article reports on the outcomes yielded by two different virtual exchanges conducted before and after the forced closures of academic institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. They were designed considering interests and motivations of Gen Z students (Seemiller & Grace, 2016) and aimed at including a Global Citizenship Education approach to deal with contemporary world challenges. The current article details these telecollaborations between two cohorts of a large private research university in Eastern North America and two large research state universities in the Southern part of North America and Western South America that were brought together to deepen their understanding on the migration phenomenon by performing collaborative tasks. Throughout these exchanges and at the conclusion of the courses, students reported common and divergent perspectives on issues discussed. Although there were more points of coincidence in their understanding of the phenomenon, when learners did not agree, they sought to see the other's perspectives and strived to find common ground. Overall, the evaluation of these virtual exchanges was considered a beneficial and rewarding experience that not only made their learning easier but gave access to more global perspectives about the migration phenomenon. The terms virtual exchange and telecollaboration are treated synonymously.

Keywords: Gen Zers, internationalization, Global Citizenship, persuasive games, in-person experiential learning

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1. Introduction

Virtual exchanges (VEs) have been implemented mainly in foreign language instruction in higher education for more than twenty-five years. These interactions were initially text-based communications (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; O'Dowd, 2021). They were considered peripheral or add-on to courses done by highly motivated faculty (O'Dowd, 2011; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, telecollaborations were making inroads in classes other than foreign language as part of the need to incorporate internationalization in higher education (De Wit, 2016). Projects involving students of different areas, like social sciences or engineering, from different geographical locations started to take place. Some were under the umbrella of COIL in North and South America and Erasmus+ in Europe.

More attention was drawn to VE when the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools' closures and limited physical mobility all over the world. This was especially the case of finding an alternative for the impossibility of studying abroad and the need to fill that gap. Many universities embraced internationalization through the integration of telecollaborative activities into their curriculum as a response to the contactless era (Parsons & Garant, 2022). Other institutions continued developing their curricula using VE as another tool in their scheduled plan to foster internationalization.

This is the case at the university in Eastern North America where experiential learning and internationalization constitute the cornerstone of its mission and vision of higher education. To achieve them, two of their strategic actions consist in developing opportunities for experiential learning and bringing the world into the classroom through a variety of strategies; among those are international telecollaborations to facilitate the students' development of a global citizenship approach to tackle world challenges. The two VEs reported respond to this mission and vision. They are in a program that has included telecollaborations in the language sequence to foster intercultural and linguistic competence for several years and has relied on traditional instruction and experiential learning in subject classes to develop global citizenship. Incorporating VEs into subject classes complemented the existing telecollaborations in the program. Additionally, first, other colleges and departments at the university had already implemented content-based telecollaborations. Second, when the post-pandemic VE was carried out, the partner institutions continued in lockdown despite that it had started to cease in some parts of the world. Thus, the VE also aimed at providing support for learners' social and emotional well-being.

2. Context

Two Cultural Studies classes of Advanced level of Spanish students at a large private research university in Eastern North America collaborated with two Anthropology classes of first language speakers of Spanish at two large research state universities, one in Southern part of North America and the other in Western South America. Both classes at the private university covered migration to distinct parts of the world. In the first VE, pre-pandemic, students learned about migration in transit coming from Central America considering the sociopolitical circumstances of that region, especially the Northern Triangle. In the other, post-pandemic VE, learners explored migration into Spain and its citizens' reactions towards migration waves. Their counterparts approached the migration from an anthropological perspective, also considering the circumstances of the region.

These were undergraduate students. At the private university, students came from different majors, not only from Anthropology or Sociology; they study Fashion, Global Studies, while most of the students at state universities came from Anthropology or similar majors. They were small classes: 9 and 14 students in the first and second VE respectively. This author collaborated with two different colleagues at partner universities to design the content and logistics of the VEs. We facilitated the VEs by sending reminders, monitoring interactions and product creation. In the post-pandemic VE, a TA helped facilitating. The language used in these VEs was Spanish. Before continuing with the objectives and project design, it is necessary to contextualize these VEs within Global Citizenship Education and Gen Zers.

Table 1. VE descriptions

Country	Majors	Course	Tasks
Public University Southern North America	Anthropology	Migration in Americas	Edit Questionnaire Compare & Analyze Questionnaire & Real-life experiential activity
Private University Eastern North America	Different	Migration	Edit Questionnaire Compare & Analyze Questionnaire & Virtual experiential activity
Public University Western South America	Anthropology	Migration in Europe	Conversations Podcasts & Final Project
Private University Eastern North America	Different	Migration to Spain	Same

2.1. Global citizenship education

Global citizenship education (GCED), one of the global targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, focusses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities. Seven targets provide a pathway for all countries to guide the achievement of its overarching goal. Target 4.7 aims to “ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity...” (UNESCO, 2015a, p. 48). In this context, global citizenship refers to the idea that “individuals are members of multiple, diverse, local and non-local networks.” This sense of belonging allows them to be socially responsible “to act for the benefit of all societies, not just their own” (United Nations, n.d.). GCED contributes towards equipping learners to acquire knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that empower them to execute global citizenship’s ultimate purpose, which is to create a more equitable world. Its learning outcomes encompass cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral domains. In the first, “learners acquire knowledge and understanding of local and global issues as well as develop skills for critical thinking”. In the second, they “experience a sense of belonging to a broader community and share values and responsibilities based on human rights.” In the third one, “learners act effectively and responsibly at local and global levels for a more peaceful and sustainable world” (UNESCO, 2015b, p. 22).

According to *Global Citizenship Education Topics and Learning Objectives*, to achieve those outcomes, the instructor needs to be a facilitator, a guide, who designs participatory, learner-centered activities to encourage students to engage in critical inquiry about the issues that classes are targeting to learn about and understand. In this model of instruction, in addition to reading articles, watching videos, and answering questions, teaching-learning practices should entail opportunities to experience learning in an array of contexts including the classroom and communities. Activities such as group investigation, international VEs, and community service are frequently employed “to support the development of a range of specific and connected competencies in an integrated manner” (UNESCO, 2015b, pp. 53-54). In *Succeeding Globally Through International Education and Engagement*, the U.S. Department of Education (2022) advocates for a domestic education agenda whose purpose consists in “developing a globally and culturally competent citizenry” (p. 2). Its three interrelated objectives, “increase students’ global and cultural competencies, learn from and with other countries, and engage in education diplomacy (p. 3),” support Sustainable Development Goal 4 and a GCED approach. Tertiary education institutions play a vital role in advancing the GCED learning outcomes.

VEs afford the possibility to design classes that advance the already mentioned agenda. The array of tasks and tools used allows students to learn in different contexts, which can contribute to increasing their understanding of local and global issues and the development and acquisition of hard and soft skills that will help them to solve world challenges as Gen Zers wish to do.

2.2. Generation Z

The population currently attending education institutions consists of Generation Z students. Gen Z refers to those born from 1995 through 2010; they are also known as digital natives, the Net Generation or iGeneration (Seemiller & Grace, 2016); they account for 32 percent of the world's population of 7.7 billion, according to the Pew Research Center. Now, they are advancing through the educational system in the world. They are the most racially diverse generation ever (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Walton Family Foundation, 2021). They believe in diversity and social justice and that they can change the world. Seven social issues seem to matter for them: health care, mental health, higher education, economic security, civic engagement, race equity and the environment (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). They do not know a world without technology and social media culture, which play a significant role in every aspect of their daily life, from social communication to learning and shopping. Thus, they expect digital learning tools to be deeply integrated into their education which might not only make their learning easier but will also provide more access to information. In addition, they expect to be involved in their learning process, having their ideas and perspectives considered in decision-making. They seek and embrace learning activities that “incorporate independent and hands-on work with engaging instructors and supportive peers” (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 183). Different surveys among this population report learning by doing.

The model of instruction suggested to develop GCED can capitalize on this generation's interests, strengths, and preferences for learning by designing programs which include collaborative environments that allow them to learn alongside their peers using the online platforms they most favor. In that respect, watching YouTube videos for learning new information continues gaining popularity whilst using Instagram and Snapchat to communicate has lost popularity the last couple of years (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Vogels et al., 2022). Furthermore, the great majority of Gen Zers report gaming through either the web-based platform or mobile applications from 20 minutes to 7 hours on their pastime per week (Jakob, 2021). This hobby can also be incorporated into their learning activities to recreate experiential opportunities that might help them to understand local and global issues upon which they might address social change later in their lives and careers.

3. Objectives

As already stated, these VEs respond to the university's vision of internationalization and experiential learning by advancing these types of collaborations in different areas. They aimed to capitalize on Gen Zers' interests and motivations to develop global citizenry relying on issues that matter to them as well as giving agency in their learning process by selecting content of projects, logistics and tools used.

3.1. Project designs

These undergraduate elective classes engaged in three types of tasks, which were information exchange, comparison and analysis, and collaboration and product creation ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Types of Tasks in these VEs (based on O'Dowd & Waire, 2009)

Category	Task	Description	Class
Information Exchange	Engage in informal discussion	Students share their research on migration into Europe	Post-pandemic VE
Comparison and Analysis	Comparing class questionnaires	Students converse on migration in transit based on collaboratively drafted questionnaires and independent research	Pre-pandemic VE
Collaboration and Product Creation	Collaborating on product	Students collaborate on creating podcast and final project	Post-pandemic VE

Two months before the pre-pandemic VE started, faculty decided on their learning objectives, selecting a comparison and analysis task based on a collaborative questionnaire and two experiential learning activities (a real-life experience vs a virtual one) and the language of interaction. During the period of preparation, faculty drafted the questionnaire and concurred in having learners to cooperatively produce the last draft. After the weekly online communication, students wrote a paragraph on the highlights of the comparison. Faculty facilitated the logistics of the exchange contacting each other if there was any unplanned issue and checking the progress of the interaction in class sessions.

Due to the difference in academic calendars, this VE lasted four weeks. Two asynchronous activities were carried out, a collaborative questionnaire and weekly one-hour conversations to compare and analyze a questionnaire on countries' perspectives about migration in transit. Before the beginning of online communication, both cohorts of students edited the questionnaire drafted by faculty. First,

students at the public university edited individually and later collectively. Second, learners at the private university followed the same procedure. Third, both cohorts agreed on the final version to work with. Questions zeroed in on specific aspects of issues of which students wanted to deepen their understanding. For example, to the general question on how migration had affected students' lives and people's perceptions towards immigrants, learners added a subset of more detailed questions.

Students also compared two experiential situations; one was a simulated situation lived through a persuasive game. The other was a real-life experience visiting a shelter for migrants in transit. Persuasive games can represent real or imagined systems that exhibit how society deals with social and moral issues (Bogost, 2010). By playing them, players understand how systems, i.e., industry, politics, governments, work in the real world. To win in a game, they must take political, physical, or moral decisions. In the game Nation States, learners individually designed a nation according to their beliefs and knowledge of an efficient government. Everybody created a government that did not face as much inequality nor corruption as they had learned seems to pervade Central America. In a subsequent class session, they shared their experience playing the game. The goal of the game was to provide an insight into the politics involved in government administration and their potential repercussions for its citizens. Later, during the VE, they compared it with what their counterparts had learnt at the shelter about how governmental decisions were affecting Central America and its citizens. Contrasting these two experiential learning activities provided a multi-dimensional view of the migration crisis. They always communicated via WhatsApp. In addition to weekly reflections, students could also incorporate relevant information discussed with their counterparts in class discussion boards. Students were given credit for participation.

The institutions working in the post-pandemic VE had partnered in foreign language telecollaborations for several years. A summer prior to the beginning of the collaboration, faculty decided their learning objectives and the logistics of the exchange, choosing to request a collaborative and product creation task (podcasts), giving freedom to students to select the theme to develop in the task, the platforms to collaborate and their grouping process (MacLeod & Yang, 2018). Faculty facilitated the exchange by sending reminders, monitoring, and redirecting the product creation. A TA also assisted in this process.

Due to different academic calendars, this VE lasted all term at the private university, but ten weeks of the partner university's semester. Two synchronous and two asynchronous activities were executed. The first one consisted of two class meetings, one to introduce each other and their interests in the subject, and the other to present their final project and to provide their feedback on the VE. The asynchronous entailed students meeting in groups of four to engage in informal conversations on

the issues researched and to create four biweekly podcasts and to draft their final project (an oral presentation, or a paper). The informal discussions were based on their own independent research and class materials.

After the first synchronous activity, in a WhatsApp group, students decided their group membership based on their interests on migration. A TA from the university in Western South America facilitated communication. Students had a week to select their group membership and freely decide four different themes or aspects of a theme covered in their respective classes to further develop them in podcasts. First, students engaged in conversations to discuss and present their research. Second, they met to produce the podcast. They were instructed to base them on research, to be creative, and to have equitable participation of group members. Students cooperatively divided tasks and research and decided the logistics of production including the platform and their name. The final project followed the same process. The podcasts were evaluated considering their research, creativity, ability to hook the audience and equitable participation of group members. Google docs and BbLearn were selected to work with.

The rationale for the structure of these telecollaborations and their theme intended to capitalize on Gen Zers' interests and motivations. They are open-minded individuals who want to have an active role in their learning and prefer hands-on activities ([Freiermuth & Huang, 2015](#)). Their beliefs in equity, access, and inclusion agree with the overarching goal of GCED to acquire knowledge and understanding of world challenges to create a better world.

4. Evaluation of outcomes

A qualitative analysis of the products generated in these exchanges was done. It also included notes taken during the debriefing class sessions and students' anonymous end of the term feedback. Instances of difference of opinions during the online collaborations were noted to learn how participants addressed them.

These two telecollaborations rendered similar outcomes; both were praised. In the pre-pandemic VE, learners noticed the similarity between societies in terms of accepting migrants or not and how acceptance related to the socioeconomic sector of the population, e.g., economically stable citizens accepted more immigrants than those economically unstable. A mutual respect for different points of view also seemed evident in the comments throughout the term as noted in their weekly interactions and end of term feedback. For example, there was a difference of opinion about gangs in Central

America, one student at the public university considered them a criminal enterprise in contrast with their counterpart who believed they existed to fulfill a role in society. After each other explained their rationale, both could understand each other's perspective and did not try persuading their partner to change their mind.

The post-pandemic VE was qualified as rewarding and enriching in terms of content, collaboration, research strategies, group dynamics, and technological knowledge acquired. Considering content, students reported having learnt that immigration was an international issue and not a regional one, as well as how different social, political, and environmental problems contributed to migration. Their research strategies and group dynamics improved due to this collaboration. Because they chose their topics, they felt more focused and involved in the task, and more motivated (Freiermuth & Huang, 2015). The quality of the podcasts in terms of content and production improved along the term. For example, some included a preview of the following episode. The four podcasts' topics and the final project developed more in-depth themes discussed in their classes or researched other subtopics, for example, causes of migration (including climate change), human rights (trafficking, gender equality), art, etc.

In short, besides capitalizing on Gen Zers' interests in social concerns, these activities sought to capitalize on intrapersonal and social learning which Gen Zers favor. Negotiating the interactions' structure and content gave them autonomy, creativity, freedom, and flexibility in their learning process, which they embraced. It also allowed learners to acquire knowledge on a local and global issue, migration that touched upon other related world challenges like human rights, gender equality, or poverty as seen in their created products. These telecollaborations seemed to have contributed to developing a global citizenry.

Despite the careful planning between faculty, an unwelcome misalignment between the two cohorts' expectations regarding the final product took place. This unintentional miscommunication between faculty caused confusion and generated some stress among participants who recommended improving communication between the professors and students in their final evaluation. This will be addressed in subsequent telecollaborations.

5. Conclusion and implications

This practice report illustrated how tapping into Gen Z's interests in social justice and motivations to provoke change in the world, used in two VEs, contributed to the development of a global citizenship

approach to a world challenge. In addition to having a say in the process by collaborating in the design of a questionnaire and/or selecting the themes to the topics developed in these classes, students were provided with experiential learning by using procedural games or visiting a shelter for migrants in transit. Additionally, they enhanced their understanding and learning of a global issue from different perspectives. They also realized the points of coincidence between their society's perspectives on migration as well as their own. They came to understand commonalities and respect differences, which is one of the aims to be a global citizen. Finally, but not least important, they appreciated the opportunity to meet and work with peers from other latitudes. They seemed to have had a social investment in their projects and their relationship with their peers. Hopefully, it would be the beginning of a life-long learning experience. Having students work collaboratively in a persuasive game in a similar format as they did in the podcasts' production might be worth exploring in future telecollaborations.

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