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ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN UKRAINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AND COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING IN EUROPE, THE USA, AND CANADA

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Giving more and more attention to fostering multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural competences has become inevitable in today's interconnected world for future generations. Virtual exchange and collaborative online international learning programs provide invaluable opportunities for meaningful and intellectually stimulating interactions with people from different corners of the world, and thereby improve global competence. This study looks into the case where both cases were introduced into the Ukrainian educational space. The VE programs not only extend the language comprehension and communication skills, but respond to the development of empathy, collaboration and problem-solving skills. Notwithstanding obstacles, for instance, arousing students' involvement and low level of institutional support. However, VE and COIL programs would vastly increase the cross-bordering of Ukrainian universities. This article shows that the creation of a national educational center for the training of professionals, the spread of the advantages of digitization and the blending of education with the virtual environment need special attention. The supportive initiatives through these innovative ways, Ukrainian higher education can make the students ready for success in the multifaceted world, which brings peace and a sustainable future.

Keywords: virtual exchange, international collaboration, the USA, Canada, Europe, intercultural communication



У сучасному світі все більше уваги приділяється формуванню міждисциплінарних і міжкультурних компетентностей, які є критично важливими для майбутніх фахівців. Віртуальний обмін і спільні міжнародні навчальні програми онлайн надають безцінні можливості для змістовної та інтелектуально стимулюючої взаємодії з людьми з різних куточків світу і, таким чином, сприяють розвитку глобальної компетентності. У цьому дослідженні розглядається досвід впровадження в український освітній простір програм віртуального обміну. Програми віртуальної освіти не лише розширюють можливості вдосконалення мовних навичок та міжкультурної комунікації, але й сприяють розвитку емпатії, співпраці та навичок вирішення проблем. Незважаючи на перешкоди, наприклад, мотивація студентів та низький рівень інституційної підтримки, програми віртуального обміну сприяють розвитку міжнародного співробітництва українських університетів. Автори дослідження надають рекомендації щодо ефективного провадження віртуальних проєктів в українських університетах. Підтримуючи ініціативи в цих інноваційних напрямках, українська вища освіта розширює інструменти підготовки студентів до професійної реалізації у сучасному глобалізованому світі.

Ключові слова: віртуальні обміни, міжнародна співпраця, США, Канада, Європа, міжкультурна комунікація.

Introduction. The world incessantly becomes more integrated in terms of globalization. The coming generations should be able to have essential competencies to meet those global quandaries that are mostly cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. Being in Virtual Exchange (VE) programs or study abroad options will be useful opportunities to meet the new international environment ahead of a young person. These encounters help create the desire and aptitude to unite different cultures and facilitate communication and teamwork with people of all origins. Virtual exchanges provide the solution of opening the door to the most diverse participators worldwide in order to let every young person gain better access to enriched global, cross-cultural education and international connections at a larger scale.

VE not only teaches the theoretical material but also provides students with the tools to participate in real-life professional situations. Collaborative tasks not only improve a learner's language competence but also involve students as world citizens. VE projects remove language barriers and communication skills soar in a secure, authentic, and interactive atmosphere. Transcultural interaction in VE fosters higher communication, collaboration, empathy, language competence, and problem-solving skills along with the ability to perform job proficiencies. Alongside inspiration and self-confidence, participants also acquire an international network of friends. Also, it is a cheap and scalable method that suits different individuals who stand to miss opportunities to experience the world.

While the term Virtual Exchange is rooted in European higher education research and practice, the concept of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) stems from the American context, stating that COIL is not a technology or a platform - but rather a teaching and learning paradigm that develops cross-cultural



awareness across shared multicultural learning environment. The goal of this study is to analyze the differences and similarities between these approaches and VE implementation in Ukraine with the recommendations on VE practices integration in the Ukrainian educational environment.

Virtual Exchange has grown over the past twenty years and has served as an innovative tool in education over the years. In the realm of foreign language education, Virtual Exchange has been marked by many names, like telecollaboration 2.0 (Guth & Helm, 2010), e-tandem (O'Rourke, 2007), and Online Intercultural Exchange (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). It has become a powerful strategy for learning languages via Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or Network-based Language Teaching (NBLT) (Kern et al., 2008). Mainly, there have been two types of Virtual Exchange in language learning. The first type, called e-tandem, focused on helping learners work on their own and keep learning languages outside the classroom. The second type, known as Cultural Telecollaboration or Online Cultural Exchange (O'Dowd, 2007), grew popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s for focusing on the cultural and social parts of learning languages. The telecollaborative model of Virtual Exchange promotes the integration of online interaction as a meaningful component in foreign language programs. Interaction involves student partners from different foreign institutions, where the teachers in the collaborating institutions develop international tasks and projects that students independently accomplish. Foreign language telecollaboration is another way of making native language education a bicultural process that goes beyond just language proficiency but also includes intercultural awareness.

One of the most popular models of Virtual Exchange is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), an approach that originated at the State University of New York (SUNY) and is supported by member institutions through the Center for COIL at SUNY and the Nodal Network (Rubin, 2016). COIL Centre takes the initiative of facilitating online learning and developing connections with international partners. In this way, it involves instructors and administrators in the development of Virtual Exchange programs, thereby facilitating and speeding up the programs' design. The educator and COIL researcher Rubin (2016) states that COIL does not only work as a technology tool and platform; rather, it is an approach that carries cultural understanding across various cultures and serves as our common multicultural learning space. This model focuses on developing a collaborative learning space where educators from different cultural groups work together toward the development of shared syllabi for students. This process emphasizes experiential and collaborative learning for the learners.

Telecollaboration is yet another model of virtual exchange for language learning, incorporating in-class learning, and is similar to COIL. However, unlike COIL, telecollaboration is designed particularly for language learning (O'Dowd, O'Rourke, 2019). Apart from that, there is an organization like Soliya that functions as a mediator, where cross-cultural exchanges between the Western countries and the Muslim and Arab world are conducted (Elliott-Gower & Hill, 2015; O'Dowd, O'Rourke 2019; Rubin, 2016). Although the models are different in some design elements, they are all aimed at making it possible for international students who are



not able to attend traditional study abroad programs to do intercultural learning and communication online.

The largest research topic in this field is the contribution VE gives to learning the language and intercultural communication (Barbier & Benjamin, 2019; Guadamillas Gómez, 2017). Language learning situations in which the learner should respond to a partner via virtual media are critical for enriching vocabulary and perfecting the speech flow. So, courses on language learning that resort to the VE model are based on the assumption that they can provide learners with benefits, especially when synchronous personal peer-to-peer interactions are possible.

Methodology. This study employs a comparative research design to analyze the ways VE and COIL programs are integrated and implemented within the Ukrainian educational system. As data collection procedures we carried out a comprehensive literature review of the existing evidence on VE and COIL initiatives in Europe and North America; analysis of documents, case studies, and reports from institutions involved in VE and COIL programs, particularly focusing on the studies related to VE program and the SUNY COIL Center; analysis of specific COIL and VE projects implemented in the Ukrainian universities involving document analysis, surveys, and interviews to cross-verify consistency and reliability of the research. Under these conditions, we intend to provide a full overview of how VE and COIL programs fit into the Ukrainian educational environment for promoting internationalization and strengthening global competencies among students.

Results and discussion. The objective of the study is to compare online collaboration programs and analyze the level of their integration into the Ukrainian educational environment. VE and COIL have emerged as innovative approaches to internationalize education and foster global competence development among students. In 2006, SUNY COIL was established, and it has now become a well-known promoter of global networked learning in the US, Canada, and other parts of the world. COIL experts have partnered with educational instructors from the SUNY system and other countries by starting joint intercontinental virtual educational collaborations. Today, the leading organization promoting virtual educational collaboration in Europe, similar to COIL, is UNICollaboration, established in 2016. This organization is in charge of the virtual exchange of ideas distribution, the training sessions for the teachers and students, and hosting the "fairs" in which partnerships and virtual projects are established.

These programs leverage technology to connect classrooms and learners across borders, enabling collaborative learning and intercultural dialogue. VE and COIL are often interchangeable terms as they define similar activities, namely online interaction and problem-solving. However, we consider that we should analyze them through the lens of two different approaches towards internationalization: European and Northern American. Because of the close geographic proximity and the long history of links between European countries, their universities have been at the forefront of internationalization. On the contrary, US and Canadian universities devote their efforts to the preparation of students for the position of business leaders within the local economy (Rubin et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the opportunity to travel within Europe and the availability of organizations dedicated to the creation of programs for



the international exchange of students are important factors associated with the amazing cultural experiences students will encounter while studying. This exposure to different cultures is not only restricted to the academic field; it is also of great importance to businesses and society throughout the continent. As a result, graduates of European universities get ahead of the rest due to the competitive advantages conferred on them through international exposure that they gain during their undergraduate studies (O'Dowd, 2018). This aspect goes beyond the world of education and contributes to the dynamic and integrative business environment that characterizes the globalized business world today.

Despite wide popularity on both continents, these programs demonstrate some slight differences. The number of educators outlines the problems of students in online exchange programs in Europe, the USA, and Canada. Some of these factors are language barriers, technological challenges, differences in system curricula and the expectations of the students, varying levels of preparedness among participants, grading and motivation, and communication and coordination problems. Nonetheless, virtual exchange and COIL programs can involve large numbers of students and teachers in online collaborative activities that will lead to the development of 21st-century skills such as global communication, critical thinking, and intercultural competence. These programs, thus, enhance the variety of ways in which international education is done; the programs become more equitable and inclusive, therefore, the participants who may not have the means or ability to participate in the traditional study abroad programs can be part of it.

COIL is a type of virtual exchange that stresses explicitly disciplinary and interdisciplinary, as well as intercultural learning with students from other backgrounds. COIL provides a platform for highly informative contact between teachers and students from different geographical areas. COIL is grounded on constructing team-taught learning environments where teachers from two different cultures collaborate in creating a shared syllabus, putting the emphasis on experiential and collaborative student learning. Multiple studies on COIL have provided evidence of positive effects on student academic achievement and revealed that this success rate is noticeably higher among under-represented groups (Rubin, 2022).

The search results demonstrate that the virtual exchange programs in Europe, like the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative, pay more attention to the structured and facilitated online collaborative learning sessions that mostly aim at promoting intercultural dialogue. Helm, Guth, Shuminov, and Van Der Velden (2020) observe virtual exchange as a learning process that involves people with different cultural backgrounds mediating through the technological platform over some time. It relates to using technology as a means of transcending the boundaries of culture and geography and facilitating interschool interactions from the community where they originate. Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange developers proposed the following key features for VE: the emphasis is on people-to-people contacts and communication; the objective of the learning is to develop soft skills like culture awareness and digital literacies; it is primarily learner-led where learners are beneficiaries and the main actors in the whole knowledge sharing process.



The shared message, which connects both approaches, is evidence that intercultural understanding and awareness are not the natural outcomes of contact between different groups/cultures. Virtual exchange programs specifically address intercultural understanding and engaging with differences. Activities include online discussions, group projects, and intercultural dialogues aimed at enhancing cross-cultural communication skills, critical thinking, and empathy skills development.

Virtual exchange programs in Europe, such as the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative, focus on online structured and facilitated collaborative learning sessions that bring participants together to promote intercultural dialogue. Whereas COIL emphasizes the integration of global perspectives into the curriculum, fostering intercultural communication and collaboration through shared interdisciplinary tasks and projects. Among the most successful COIL activities Canadian educators from Humber College outline:

- integrated project into the course that is already offered at both institutions, for instance, a common assignment or capstone project;
- the project conducted outside the classroom as a research project;
- supervised by an industry or community partner project, when the program was developed as a work-integrated learning (WIL) or service-based experience.

Implementation of the virtual exchange projects that involved students and teachers from Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute helped us to understand and experience both beneficial and challenging aspects of such educational formats. We experienced both models, COIL and Virtual Exchange, with partners from the UNICollaboration platform. One of the disadvantages when coming up with virtual exchange projects was the lack of a particular mechanism to reward students and create a sense of motivation among them. It is important to create particular conditions for students to stimulate them to participate. Another issue was related to extra load for teachers as the projects were not integrated into the curriculum and required the development of extra activities and conducting extra classes. In Ukraine, practices of Virtual Exchanges are not usually funded, if not supported by Erasmus funding; therefore, these projects are considered teachers' voluntary activity, and these projects have low university support despite VE benefits. We would like to highlight that VE or COIL projects contribute to universities' internationalization through:

- collaboration in the field of education and research with international colleagues;
- development of shared curricula, courses, and scientific projects;
- enhancement of the international university profile improving the institution's brand and reputation;
- creating networks and alliances and increasing the efficiency of collaboration between educational institutions.

Both platforms, COIL and UNICollaboration, provide educators with training and methodological support. In Ukraine, there are no such platforms and opportunities to train VE educators or managers, so educators have to search for information, study VE methodology, and manage the project themselves. The most frequent methodological strategies used by Ukrainian teachers are problem-based and task-based learning. First, students are suggested a problem to solve. Then together in



international groups, they come up with a solution and independently coordinate the content of the deal and the sequence of actions. The students' peer work includes tasks like meeting management, network development, knowledge acquisition, group decision-making, academic debates, action planning, and collaborative feedback. The context of the work is similar to the environment of the professional world students will face after graduation.

Students get the necessary knowledge and employability skills by participating in the project, which can eventually be applied beyond the project context. Apart from professional skills, students develop their soft skills and competencies: enhance foreign language proficiency; enrich digital competence; develop intercultural communication skills and global competence; improve self-regulation skills while making independent decisions on the choice and organization of the content of individual and common work, as well as control the time and schedule.

Recommendations. In order to provide successful and efficient implementation of the VE and COIL projects in the Ukrainian educational environment, it is critical to introduce some changes at the university policy level regarding the VE project organization and management. The institutional involvement will allow the creation of an effective mechanism for supporting VE and recognizing students' academic achievements obtained during VE. The implementation of virtual exchange programs can effectively take place in Ukraine by adopting best practices and tailored recommendations based on the insights obtained from established programs. Here are some important recommendations for effective implementation:

- successful VE implementation requires educators to have a high level of VE methodology awareness and developed global competencies, intercultural communication skills, and digital literacy. Ukrainian educators lack knowledge and skill in this area, so training centers, online courses, webinars, and conferences should be organized to integrate this field into the Ukrainian educational landscape. The national online platform with the database of VE suggested by universities might be of great help in searching for partners or ideas. Build off the frameworks and resources developed by such initiatives as the Stevens Initiative (USA), which provides an in-depth guide and a toolkit for overcoming common virtual exchange challenges, including best practices on the evaluation of programs, the intercultural competence development, and technology integration;

- bring into focus relevance and impact: VE within this action shall be relevant to the needs of education in Ukraine while remaining aligned with broader educational objectives. The projects should deal with such critical themes as intercultural dialogue, soft skills development, or personal and professional growth of participants. It is important to emphasize how these projects might bring lasting impacts not only on individual participants but on the whole educational system;

- sustainability and scalability: courses should include practical applications for sustainability, be relevant for students, and be easily integrated into other systems or structures. It is also important to reflect upon the extensibility of successful practices within other areas. Outcomes and benefits of real VE cases should be widely disseminated to justify the necessity of an attitude shift toward the integration of VE



into curricular and educational planning in order to ensure that the latter maximize their potential positive implications over time;

- national online platform: A national center should be established to provide educators with the necessary information and training, assist in finding a partner, and develop the project activities.

Such steps will contribute to students' involvement and motivation, as VE results will be recognized by universities as academic achievements. Thus, through the enforcement of these recommendations, Ukraine will be in a position to introduce efficient and meaningful virtual exchange programs that will enhance student learning and promote international cooperation.

Conclusion. In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of virtual exchange and COIL in enhancing global competence development among students. While the specific methodologies, tasks, and outcomes may differ between the European and American approaches, both emphasize the importance of leveraging technology to foster cross-cultural collaboration, intercultural dialogue, and the acquisition of essential skills for success in an increasingly globalized world. Being a part of this globalized world, Ukraine should introduce actions to integrate VE into our educational environment for a peaceful and more sustainable future.

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