

Challenges in VE and BIPs

Virtual Exchange & Blended Mobility Training
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Section 1 · Common Challenges in Virtual Exchange

VE CASE STUDIES – WHAT WOULD YOU DO IN THESE SITUATIONS?

Read these case studies of common issues that can emerge in Virtual Exchange projects. Discuss with your partners how the teachers should react to the situation.

Case Study 1 · Technical Access Failure

During the first live session of a Virtual Exchange project between a university in Slovakia and one in Japan, several students in Japan experience difficulty accessing the video call due to a firewall restriction at their institution. Meanwhile, some Slovakian students struggle with audio issues, making communication nearly impossible. With half the class unable to participate properly, the session is cut short. The instructors now need to decide how to move forward without losing engagement.

What would you do in this situation?

Case Study 2 · Unequal Contributions

A joint project between a German and an Argentinian university requires students to work in mixed international teams on a research presentation. However, two weeks into the project, the German students complain that their Argentinian partners are not responding to messages or contributing to shared documents. At the same time, the Argentinian students say they don't know what is expected of them and feel the German students are taking over. The instructors must decide how to address the situation.

What would you do in this situation?

Case Study 3 · Language Proficiency Gap

An online exchange between a Dutch university and a Thai university is conducted in English, but after the first week, Thai students privately express to their teacher that they are struggling to understand the discussions and feel embarrassed about their English skills. Meanwhile, the Dutch students have started using more complex language and informal expressions, making it even harder for their partners to follow. The Thai teacher reaches out to the Dutch instructor to find a way to keep all students engaged.

What would you do in this situation?

Case Study 4 · Crisis and Conflict

A Virtual Exchange project between a French and a Ukrainian university is suddenly disrupted when the military conflict escalates in Ukraine. Some Ukrainian students are unable to attend sessions, while others say they don't know if they should discuss their situation with their French partners. The French students are unsure how to approach discussions, as they don't want to seem insensitive. The Ukrainian instructor contacts the French professor to discuss how to continue the project taking into account the special circumstances of the situation.

What would you do in this situation?

Case Study 5 · Student Wellbeing and Group Work

Halfway through a Virtual Exchange project on sustainable tourism between an Italian and a Brazilian university, an Italian student becomes noticeably withdrawn. They stop contributing to discussions and miss scheduled online meetings. Eventually, the Italian professor learns that the student is struggling with personal issues and feels overwhelmed by the group work. The Brazilian teammates, unaware of the situation, express frustration that their work is being affected. The instructors must decide how to proceed while being sensitive to the student's well-being.

What would you do in this situation?

Discussion

Which of these five challenges do you consider most likely to arise in your own institutional context?

What strategies could you put in place to prevent or respond to it?

Section 2 · Inclusion and Diversity Issues in VE

Discussing issues of inclusion and equity in Virtual Exchange

What issues or challenges related to inclusion and equity do you see here? Do all the students have the same opportunities to actively participate in the project? Are they being treated as equal partners?

Example 1 · A Virtual Exchange between Palestinian and American Engineering Students

International teams of Palestinian and American engineering students work together to solve sustainability challenges and to develop green building designs for a Palestinian Refugee Camp.

The designs are judged by a panel of experts in a final competition. Palestinian students from the winning teams travel to the United States to meet their American counterparts and learn about green building in the United States.

What issues or challenges related to inclusion and equity do you see here? Do all the students have the same opportunities to actively participate in the project? Are they being treated as equal partners?

Example 2 · A Virtual Exchange between Students in Quebec and the USA

An American group of learners exchanged emails with a group from Quebec for over a year and a half in order to carry out various parallel learning projects. Each group was learning the other's language (English-French).

The exchange is reported to have worked extremely well and the American group are said to have considered their Quebecois partners competent and highly-proficient models for learning French.

It was not until the two groups met at the end of the exchange that the American students realised that their partner class actually consisted of deaf children.

What issues or challenges related to inclusion and equity do you see here? Are they all being treated as equal partners?

Example 3 · A Message from a Student in the USA to her Partner in Spain

"How do people there feel about same-sex marriages raising children? Are the children being raised to believe this type of marriage is the norm? Do same-sex marriages in Spain have problems with roles, like in America? For example, who serves as the mother role and who serves as the father role model? [...] Another question would be do these children grow up to enter into a same-sex marriage themselves.

These are very hard questions to answer. America was based on the Bible, we open our Congress meetings with prayer, our money is imprinted with 'In God We Trust' and laws are based on Bible beliefs. The Bible states homosexual ways are wrong. What are the beliefs in Spain?"

What issues or challenges related to inclusion and equity do you see here? Do all the students have the same opportunities to actively participate in the project? Are they being treated as equal partners?

Example 4 · A Virtual Exchange between a Class in Norway and their Partners in a Sub-Saharan African Country

The Norwegian students invest a lot of time making introductory videos for their partners in Africa and sharing them online. The videos are long, well-designed pieces of work.

The Norwegian students are frustrated when they still have not received feedback from their African partners about the videos after 2 weeks.

When the teacher enquires, he is told that the students do not have sufficient data on their phones to download the videos or to record and share their own videos.

What issues or challenges related to inclusion and equity do you see here? Do all the students have the same opportunities to actively participate in the project? Are they being treated as equal partners?

Discussion

In what ways can VE inadvertently reproduce or reinforce inequalities between partner classes? What design principles would you adopt in order to ensure that all students, regardless of location, ability, or resources, participate as genuinely equal partners?

Section 3 · Challenges in Blended Intensive Programmes

BIP Case Studies – Based on the Literature

The following case studies are drawn from the emerging literature on Blended Intensive Programmes. Read each one and discuss with your partner how the challenges described could be addressed in your own institutional context.

Case Study 1 · The Administrative Burden

Three teachers from Spain, Germany, and Finland have designed a strong BIP for Business and Sustainability students. As the project approaches, they discover that the bureaucratic requirements, including grant reporting, inter-institutional agreements, student insurance, and Erasmus+ documentation, are disproportionate to the six-day physical mobility. International Office staff at each institution are also unclear about their respective responsibilities, causing significant delays.

How can teachers and International Office staff collaborate more effectively so that the administrative demands of a BIP do not undermine its pedagogical ambition?

Case Study 2 · The Host Students' Dilemma

A BIP on Environmental Law brings together students from Germany, Italy, and Lithuania to travel to a Spanish university. The Spanish students, who are hosting the physical mobility week, discover that their international peers have received Erasmus+ travel grants to participate while they, as hosts, receive no financial support. One Spanish student writes: 'It is not fair for us to stay in our home university while the other countries get to travel abroad. I would have loved to have a final destination in a different country so that we were all on equal terms.'

What does this case reveal about the structural inequalities embedded in the BIP funding model? How might teachers address the motivational and equity challenges this creates for host students?

Case Study 3 · The Lecture-Heavy Online Phase

A BIP on Smart Cities has been running for two years. Student feedback reveals consistent dissatisfaction with the online phase. Rather than collaborative, student-centred tasks, the virtual weeks consist largely of recorded lectures and passive webinars. Students feel disengaged and disconnected from their international peers before they even arrive for the physical mobility week. The teaching team meets to redesign the online component.

What principles of task design should guide the redesign of the online phase? How can the virtual component build genuine student collaboration rather than simply transmit content?

Case Study 4 · Recognising Teachers' Extra Work

A lecturer at a Portuguese university spends over 200 additional hours developing and delivering her institution's first BIP. The programme receives excellent evaluations. When she asks her Head of Department for recognition in her workload allocation, e.g. reduced teaching hours or acknowledgement in the promotion process, she is told that BIP development is considered a voluntary activity and cannot be formally compensated.

What institutional policies and incentive structures are needed to sustain BIP development in the long term? What arguments would you make to university leadership on this teacher's behalf?

Discussion

Which of the BIP challenges discussed here resonates most with your own institutional context? What practical steps, at the level of course design, teacher collaboration, or institutional policy, could be taken to address it?