

# From Virtual Exchange to *Critical* Virtual Exchange and *Critical* Internationalization at Home

Dr. Mirjam Hauck

The Open University UK

Virtual exchange (VE) combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue with the broad reach of digital technology (EVOLVE Project Team, 2019). It is a research-informed practice and a strong catalyst in advancing the internationalization of HE curricula, known as internationalization at home (IaH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015; O’Dowd & Beelen, 2021). It can prepare for, deepen, or extend physical exchanges or—as shown by COVID-19—it can also emulate study abroad.

However, VE-based IaH is not inherently equitable, nor is it necessarily inclusive. Like other forms of online or blended education, it is prone to Western hegemonies and influenced by inequalities in access to and experience with technology, institutional constraints (e.g., lack of support and incentives for educators), gender, race, age, English language dominance, and socio-political and geopolitical challenges (Helm, 2020). Hence, as O’Dowd and Beelen (2021) conclude, “we need yet to find out more about how processes of inclusion and exclusion play out in virtual settings” (n.p.).

Critical VE (CVE) (Hauck, 2020; Klimanova & Hellmich, 2021), a nascent field in VE practice and research, aims to ensure more equitable and inclusive student exchange experiences and is characterized by the following elements (see Figure 1):

- The use of low-bandwidth technologies
- A focus on students often underrepresented in IaH, e.g., those from low socio-economic backgrounds (SoB)
- Exchange topics informed by and aligned with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- The integration of local student outreach work with businesses, NGOs, and charities to foster transversal skills development, enhance graduate employability, and support SDG achievement.

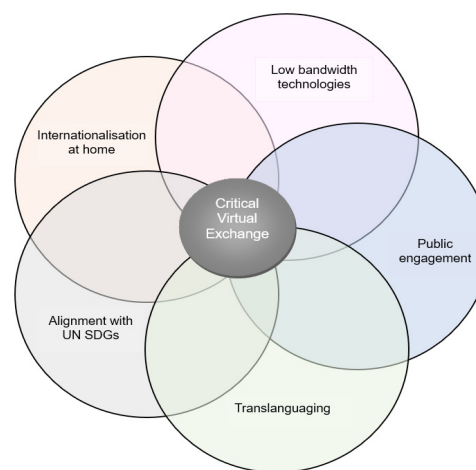


Figure 1: Critical Virtual Exchange – A Framework

In addition, we propose the systematic integration of translanguaging approaches as a defining element of CVE, particularly but not exclusively in exchanges where the learning and teaching of languages and cultures is the focal point. Translanguaging means the fluid use of multiple linguistic and semiotic resources as a single repertoire (Clavijo Olarte et al., 2023). It is about practices that encourage all learners to use their full linguistic and semiotic repertoire and help them realize their full multimodal communication potential. Multimodal communicative competence is the ability to express ideas across a wide range of modes including words, spoken or written, images (still and moving), sound, 3D models, and any combinations of these (Kress, 2003). Modeling

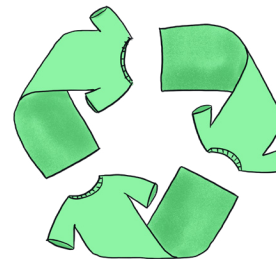
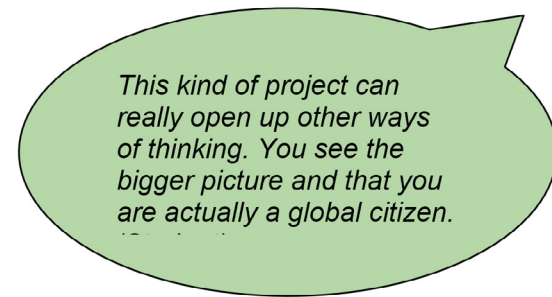
and promoting translanguaging approaches in the student exchanges not only introduces multimodal communication as a common exchange practice, it is also a first step towards equitable multilingualism (Ortega, 2017).

VE is also known to be an ideal context for developing students' digital skills as the exchanges are—by default—mediated by technology (e.g., Helm, 2014; Hauck, 2019). CVE, however, is informed by *critical* digital literacy (CDL) that explicitly leverages digital technologies for social justice-oriented action and change, e.g., by reaching out to a wider, more diverse range of students in collaborative online learning projects (Darvin, 2020; Nicolaou, 2021) such as those implemented in VE.

Finally, CVE is also an instantiation of critical global citizenship education (CGCE) (Andreotti, 2006) which has notions of power, voice, and difference at its core, and involves the systematic development of critical inquiry, engagement, reflexivity, and re-learning. Grounded in real-world issues, CGCE involves “analysis and critique of the relationships among perspectives, language, power, social groups and social practices by the learners” (Andreotti, 2006, p. 51). Designed in accordance with these notions, CVE can become a pedagogical vehicle for collaborative action, public engagement, and socio-political change. It has great potential as a first step toward learner agency, global awareness-raising and ‘thinking otherwise’ (Stein & Andreotti, 2021) and—in this way—toward *critical IaH*.

*Shared Garden* is a CVE example that is aligned with SDG 13 (Climate Action). Here, university students from France and Spain collaborated with a local allotment to develop an environmentally friendly and sustainable watering-system which was subsequently built to maintain a physical garden close to Bordeaux University campus (<https://express.adobe.com/page/qi01gwVrDxYpz/>).

Another example, *Reading the City Through Agenda 2030*, involved university students from Argentina, Poland, and Sweden in critically exploring their cities through the lens of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities). They first investigated local challenges and existing grassroots initiatives and then co-created multimodal sustainability campaigns equally relevant in their respective urban environments.



These projects share the aim of fostering CGCE by engaging students in:

- exploring sustainability issues within and across geographical and cultural contexts
- understanding global SDGs in the light of local realities
- negotiating ideas by using translanguaging strategies, digital tools, and multimodal resources
- co-creating a product as a way of implementing new knowledge and taking action.

CVE has the potential to be agenda setting for VE scholars and practitioners worldwide through its focus on social justice and inclusion and to instigate transformative change at individual, institutional, and policy level. It will create new legacies in critical IaH based on an understanding of research as “living knowledge” (Facer & Enright, 2016): praxis knowledge that connects lived experiences on the ground—by students, educators, administrators, and other decision-makers involved in CVE—with the body of global critical knowledge in international and intercultural education and transversal skills building.

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