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“Virtual Collaboration – A tool for intercultural Learning Exchange”

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Abstract: Virtual Collaboration is an underestimated modality when it comes to the regular curriculum execution and the learning possibility among students mediated by social media platforms. Without having to travel, students can strengthen intercultural competences and personal leadership, what enables them to work in communities. The Virtual Collaboration – Intercultural Learning Model provides an overview of the working methods and their outcomes. The collaboration took place in four projects between Europe and Asia, between Holland and India, between VIAA and EHA, between mentors and students and between students pursuing nursing, spiritual studies and social work.

'Virtual Collaboration – A tool for intercultural Learning Exchange' is compiled of observations from the joint work between the institutions since 2022 to 2025.

Keywords: *Intercultural learning, Student centred learning, Sustainable internationalization, Virtual exchange and Critical thinking*

Introduction

The desire to travel to another country and make new friends across the physical and cultural boundaries has become the top in the bucket list of several young minds who walk into the corridors of our institutions. Some are privileged, but many stay beyond the privilege list. In a time of geo-political polarisation, it is important to build bridges between different cultures. This has been a motivating factor for the organisations to bring students from different countries together to promote understanding and respect for different contexts.

Making learning possible across continents, due to internet data availability, and the willingness for self-directed learning were the chief areas explored. The objective of the paper is to disseminate the experiences of virtual collaboration between two organisations across the globe to leave positive impacts among student communities.

Context

The Virtual collaboration between EHA India and VIAA Zwolle Netherlands, began during a personal visit to the VIAA by a nurse educator from Herbertpur Christian Hospital to revive the previous efforts to build a collaboration for



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exchange learning in healthcare. The context of the times was when both our organisations had no designated financial support for this kind of exchange. COVID was still rampant with its after-effects, and travel between the continents wouldn't be possible if the students couldn't fund themselves. This opened the way for further exploration of the possibility for online collaboration.

What seemed like a hello visit opened doors for future engagements. The pilot project of Bridging Gaps 2022 was born with just a few students who volunteered to do the virtual collaboration. The learning we were expecting to happen was a part of the informal curriculum and wasn't part of the formal curriculum. Ms Petra Eikelboom, along with Mr Jaap Roose and Mrs Annie, under the guidance of Mr Tjalling Oosterhuis, the then Coordinator of the University's International Office and Mr Vinay John, Nursing Director, EHA, India.

Progress of the project Bridging the Gap

Initial Pilot Programme took place in 2022, 3 meetings over 3 weeks, and 20 students participated from EHA India (2 students from 5 Nursing Schools) and VIAA (10 students). This project is named Talk & Task, to underline the merge of connecting and working on an assignment. Students worked together during eight weeks.

The introduction session involved a presentation on the process – our aims, time boundary and the groups who will be working together. The assignment was placed on social and health issues as the students made their choice on the research areas or topics. The learning environment was created on an online platform, giving students the freedom of choice. During the online meetings the participants discussed the topic, to find similarities and differences in the context and the way they as learners should act in these situations. There were instructors taking the role of mentors available to support the students, to help them organise the meetings and reflect on their experiences.

Participants had to find the right time and place independent platform and use the online available resources with cultural sensitivity and asking the right questions. During the process they had to express themselves and ask the right questions to the others. At the end they had to present the gathered information as a presentation in an online meeting with all the

participants, tutors and lecturers. The students were assessed using the customised rubric template. The assessments were primarily based on communication of content, ability to think together and respectful acceptance of each other.

The students spoke of difficulties like language, time zone constraints, fear of being inadequate during the presentation, cultural differences like the higher and lower context, power dynamics, power distance, cultural directness, etc. The advantages of the program were mentioned as new friendships across social media, a non-tutored independent environment and learning resources, the ability to overcome language barriers and find ways to communicate, an enhanced interest in exploring more of the topic and a non-pressured, natural flow of the learning. A student said: "I enjoyed the travel virtually to the Netherlands as I knew I probably never couldn't even make it across the country".

Results of the Project

Participating in this project posed challenges, the first one is to get used to online communication. Some students were not used to online communication: 'Sending emails, working with friends inside EHA and meeting international friends make me feel so proud, and I feel that this was the best experience in my college life' Another student: 'Talking through WhatsApp for the first time was so exciting'. The different time zones was also challenging. Student: Time differences were difficult, but I waited when I could meet again.

Indian students, as well as the Dutch students had to communicate in their second language, several students mention a restraint in communication, but also that they helped each other. Student: 'I have never been able to talk in English with my peers. So, I was very fearful, but I was able to communicate so well. Whenever we did not understand, my online teammate explained, or we searched the meaning together and learnt English together. I have no fear now.' The intercultural communication forced the students to talk thoughtfully. Student: 'This was a valuable learning experience for me, as I had to tailor my communication to their preferences. This strengthened my ability to communicate clearly and effectively.'



Participants say that this project made them connect to students from other cultures, which also helped to look at their own lives from another perspective. A student: I was given a glimpse into their lives and customs. And it was precisely these differences that allowed me to look at my own life with a fresh perspective. Customs that were so normal to me suddenly became something special. And another student: 'I would try to go to the Netherlands when I finish my further studies in nursing.'

Students appreciated the fact that they learned about other cultures, it gave more understanding and enhanced respectful and friendly communication. Although it wasn't easy from the beginning. Student: "I can't imagine learning more during a visit abroad than I did on this project". Another student: "Though in a wheelchair, I am happy I could travel to India. I was not happy at first, but I enjoyed the whole experience of 3 months. We were a great team."

Conclusion

Bridging the Gap shows an opportunity to include student-centred, low-cost innovation, which is ideal for resource-limited settings and has the potential for replication in other teaching institutions.

Model - Bridging the Gap: Virtual Collaboration – A tool for intercultural Learning Exchange

The outcomes of the virtual collaboration are brought together in a model and combined with existing models about collaboration. The project aims to foster student-centred learning with prospective outcomes of improved communication, increased cultural sensitivity and a boost to critical thinking skills.

This model has been created based on the Open Systems Theory approach first applied by Katz and Kahn (1966); Bertalanffy (1951), ¹ used in the Input-Process-Output model of team interaction process integration by McGrath, given in 1964⁴.

The core of the collaboration is based on the 3C Collaboration model originally proposed by Ellis, Gibbs, and Rein in 1991². Communication, coordination and cooperation are the basics of every project we have had with the mentors and student interactions. Clear communications free of gaps, working together to execute the programmes, making sure to

link everyone who could contribute to the learning, were the main goals we had at every stage of the programme.

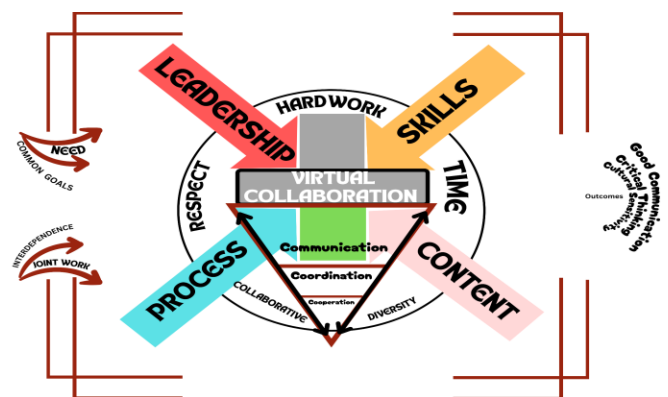
The foundations for the good outcomes were based on the time spent by the mentors and the facilitators to enlighten students on the type and pattern of professional communication, along with an introduction to the Indian and Dutch culture patterns and the 5 W's and 1H of reflective thinking (Who, What, Where, When, and Why and How)³.

The aims, working methods and outcomes are displayed in the following model, which can be distinguished into a core, a second level and a final level. The next paragraph describes step by step what is needed to shape intercultural virtual collaboration, with associated outcomes.

The core

The learning environment provided to the students was an open system, illustrated in the brown corner border lines which indicate the boundaries given to the students. The borders are described in frameworks, deadlines, the planned mentors and student groups.

The input to the whole program (red arrows) includes joint work between the organisations at different levels,



interdependence, common goals and the need for the collaboration.

The core of virtual collaboration is exchange of leadership, skills, process and content between the two organizations - EHA and VIAA, to design a powerful context over virtual collaboration.



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organisation and creativity. This curve happens between the skills and content development. The students choose to use the skills they attain in the preparation of the content they learn and present together.

Thus, the overall framework has worked on different levels from the core of virtual collaboration into a transformational process - so beautiful and vibrant.

The model has been built with a desire to help the small remote colleges which do not have enough funds for a trip abroad to learn from other institutions. This model is created to bridge the gaps in culture, communication and collaboration. The authors look forward for the widespread use of this model in the growing trends of virtual collaboration.

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