

## **The International System and the Transformation of Democracy in the 21st Century: Reflecting on a Virtual Exchange Module between Italy and the United States during COVID**

**Alessandro Quarenghi<sup>1</sup>, Kimber M. Quinney<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>International Relations, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano and Brescia, Italy

<sup>2</sup>History, California State University, San Marcos, United States.

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### ***Abstract***

*In the Spring of 2021, the authors of this paper collaborated on a co-taught Virtual Exchange (or Collaborative Online International Learning, COIL) module titled “The International System and the Transformation of Democracy in the 21st Century”. Students in Italy and in the United States were brought together virtually to explore the changing international order of the post-Cold War era, and to investigate ways in which 21st century democratic institutions of the United States and Italy are affected. This paper describes the qualitative experiences of the professors and their students in this virtual exchange and argues that the practice can offer a unique learning environment which – despite not being a substitute for international mobility – enhances, to a certain degree, students’ intercultural awareness and flexibility, organizational and collaborative skills, and ability to learn and operate in diverse environments using an array of technological tools.*

**Keywords:** *Virtual Exchange; COIL; International Politics; World Order; Democracy; Intercultural Competence.*

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## 1. Introduction

Although existing international programs allow undergraduate students to challenge themselves by attending university courses in other countries for a semester or more, quite a few, for a plurality of reasons — economic, personal, and cultural — remain in their home university for their entire academic careers. In addition, the Covid-19 global pandemic dramatically interrupted opportunities to study abroad. However, the pandemic also increased interest in the potential of remote learning and teaching with technology, offering new and exciting opportunities in higher education. One of the more innovative and impactful teaching approaches is “Virtual Exchange.”<sup>1</sup>

Virtual Exchange is a teaching and learning technique aimed at promoting global awareness and intercultural competence by employing technology to facilitate collaboration among students who live in different parts of the world (Swartz, Barbosa, & Crawford, 2020). Often described as an “innovative and inclusive” pedagogy, practitioners celebrate the approach as a means to internationalize the curriculum and as an alternative to studying abroad (Oakley, 2018; Rubin & Guth, 2105; Miao, 2018). However, it is unclear to what degree virtual exchanges allow student to engage with each other meaningfully, and how comparable they therefore are to traditional face-to-face exchange programs in terms of the intercultural and peer-learning experience offered.

## 2. Learning Objectives, Evaluation, Structure, and Themes of Our Virtual Exchange Module

In Fall 2020, Kimber Quinney, Assistant Professor of History from the California State University, San Marcos; and Alessandro Quarenghi, Lecturer in International Relations at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano and Brescia, Italy, received a faculty fellowship from the American Higher Education Alliance (AHEA)<sup>2</sup> and the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC)<sup>3</sup> to collaborate on a co-designed course and to co-teach a Virtual Exchange module in Spring 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> We use *virtual exchange* to describe our experience, but the pedagogical practice is also referred to as “internationalization at home,” “telecollaborative learning” and very often, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). The COIL Center at State University of New York (SUNY) <https://coil.suny.edu/> has been working to promote and professionalize the practice of COIL and Virtual Exchange for more than fifteen years, offering resources for best practices, such as this course development guide [http://www.ufic.ufl.edu/uap/forms/coil\\_guide.pdf](http://www.ufic.ufl.edu/uap/forms/coil_guide.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to the staff at the American Higher Education Alliance <https://www.ahealliance.org/virtualexchangefellowship/> for their support and guidance throughout the planning phase of our Virtual Exchange module. We would also like to thank the external reviewers of our original paper for their excellent recommendations for revision.

<sup>3</sup> Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration <https://conahec.org/>

Over the course of the following six months, we developed a ten-week Virtual Exchange module titled “Il sistema internazionale e la trasformazione della democrazia nel XXI secolo/The International System and the Transformation of Democracy in the 21st Century.” Our virtual exchange brought together approximately 90 students from their respective undergraduate courses in the United States (History of U.S. Foreign Policy) and Italy (International Relations).

### **2.1. Student Learning Objectives**

We co-designed student learning objectives that emphasized knowledge as well as disposition with regard to multicultural competence and global civic literacy. We relied on frameworks such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Global Learning and Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubrics.<sup>4</sup> After having participated in the Virtual Exchange, we anticipated that students would have: (A) challenged their own worldview—from both a personal and national perspective—and gained access to different perspectives on contemporary international and national political changes; (B) connected contemporary international change to internal socio-political transformations; (C) demonstrated an ability to research individually and collectively, to organize their work in a flexible manner and in a technologically innovative environment; and (D) engaged and collaborated in small and wider groups in producing a cumulative digital project illustrating their research and common understanding of a complex issue.

### **2.2. Evaluation**

Students were evaluated based on their participation in the two preliminary ‘ice-breaking’ activities; their group research, discussion, and final product; and a final personal review. More specifically, grade assessments were based on the items from Table 1.

### **2.3. Structure**

Our U.S.-Italian internationalized curricular module was complex, in terms of planning, tools, scheduling, and themes: we explored the changing international order of the post-Cold War era, allowing all of us to investigate the ways in which 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic institutions of the United States and Italy (and other NATO nations) are affected.

For ten weeks in the middle of our respective terms, we co-taught the module, asynchronously sharing lectures given in our respective courses, while guiding the students through the module’s steps and respective tasks. Initially, the module introduced students to one another, thanks to two ‘ice-breaking’ activities: the first was a guided short video

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<sup>4</sup> American Association of Colleges and Universities, *Global Learning Value Rubric* <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics>

presentation to be shared online by each student, outlining their personality and interests, while the second was an online guided group discussion on our module's main theme, as discussed in an online resource. Meanwhile, we asked our students in the United States and in Italy to join a group (4-5 members, with a more or less equal mix of Italians and Americans). Students were organized into twenty (20) different groups, each of which correlated with twenty (20) Global Issues, focusing on various subtopics while analyzing the changing international order of the 21st century and its impact on the future of democracy. We provided extensive foundational readings that included scholarly books, articles, and relevant contemporary essays in magazines and newspapers. When possible, we also provided multimedia resources for students to explore, including videos and graphic illustrations that visually represented the themes of our course.<sup>5</sup>

After the second 'ice-breaker', students started to collaborate with one another on our global themes in the course module as well as on a final digital project. Throughout the whole module, students engaged in discussions and activities using Google Drive and met face-to-face via Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, and Zoom. The final Collaborative Digital Project was created using Google Sites, then presented by students and discussed collectively in our respective classes.

**Table 1. Grade assessment breakdown**

<b>Activity to be assessed</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Weight (% final grade)</b>
Engagement	Students' demonstration of collaboration with group members	25
Originality of Collaborative Project	Students' ability to link information, analyses, and perspectives gained from different sources, and to give the class personal insights through a collective (or group) interpretation	25
Communication Effectiveness of Collaborative Project	Students' ability to organize, plan, and deliver the information in the clearest and most effective way	25
Personal Review	Students were asked to submit a short personal review of the module (500 words max.)	25

<sup>5</sup> We would like to acknowledge the generosity of graphic illustrator Doug Chayka for permitting us to employ his artwork, which aptly captures the global themes of our module and appears in publications around the world. <https://dougchayka.com/>

## **2.4. Themes**

The themes of the course encouraged students to consider the ways in which the changing international order of the 21st century impacts the future of democracy. To address this complex question, we defined four Global Topics, each of which was associated with a hypothesis to assess the impact of that particular topic on democratic institutions: 1) The weakening of unipolarity (or the empowerment of asymmetric multipolarity); 2) The International System and the Media; 3) ‘Old’ (20th Century) and ‘New’ (21st Century) Security Issues and Domestic Politics; and 4) International and Domestic Institutions and Actors. We then further divided the topics into twenty different Global Issues, each of which was collaboratively researched, discussed and presented by the respective groups of students through the final Collaborative Digital Project in order to validate or refute the respective hypothesis.<sup>6</sup>

The module demanded that students possess a solid grasp on the recent history of U.S. foreign relations and theoretical principles of international relations. But beyond this important foundation, we called on students to use that knowledge to interpret and analyze the changing conditions of the international system and to test the extent to which those changes impact democratic structures and institutions. We reminded our students that experts in both of our fields of study — including ourselves! — were similarly wrestling with the dramatic changes in the world and grappling with testing the hypotheses articulated in our global themes.

We took the exercise one step further: we encouraged students to identify ways in which these rapidly changing international systemic changes were directly affecting their own lives and to share concrete examples and evidence with one another. In this way, we pushed our students to think differently not merely about the world “out there,” but about their own worlds and to exchange ideas with one another about their respective local communities, regions, and nations.

## **3. Students’ Reflections**

Notwithstanding a few technological glitches, which was to be expected, and challenges with navigating the different time zones, the course was highly successful.

Overall, students’ reflections on their experience with the course were overwhelmingly positive. One Italian student summarized her experience: “Personally speaking, all the work involved in this module was worth it. If I had to go back, I’d do it again a hundred times. It

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<sup>6</sup> We are happy to share our Virtual Exchange Syllabus and various course assignments. Readers can contact us at [Alessandro.Quarenghi@unicatt.it](mailto:Alessandro.Quarenghi@unicatt.it) and [kquinney@csusm.edu](mailto:kquinney@csusm.edu).

was so fascinating, the fact that we could have a debate with people from the other side of the world, with different cultures, thoughts, point of view etc. I don't have suggestions to improve it, only because it was an amazing experience that every person should have at least once in their life. It helps you to grow as a person but also to improve your oral skills. [...] I know that an exchange study involves the culture, the food, the lifestyle but we have done what we were allowed to do, due to the Covid emergency and I was satisfied and happy with that. In my opinion, the collaborative virtual exchange had value as an intercultural experience, even if we were not allowed to travel and study abroad. The most valuable aspects about meeting with American students were the exchanges of opinions, views and the debate created between us.”

One U.S. student explained, “Meeting with students from a European nation was amazing as it forced me to get out of my own personal bubble and look at an issue like climate change, which I have studied extensively, through a completely new perspective. It was beneficial as I have now started applying a more global worldview to other issues that plague our societies and democracies today.” Another U.S. student noted, “The most valuable aspects of this virtual exchange were learning about viewpoints from students who are similar to us but also vastly different. I learned a lot about Italy [...] and their views on their own nation and history from them beyond what was needed to know from the module. I learned about how they feel about Covid, their history, politics, and country.”

And still another American student shared, “Getting to speak with international students helped make school feel more interactive and exciting... The work that was assigned in the module directly correlated to the theme of the class and allowed each student to explore different areas of the current state of global democracy ... Although the exchange module is not akin to studying abroad, it still enables international students to interact with one another and discuss contemporary events.” Italian students concurred: “The most valuable aspect of meeting with students living in the United States was realizing how different our culture and perception of the world are. Some things that for us are natural are very odd for them, and vice versa, so there never is a common conception. I was able to feel like I was standing right next to the American students to collaborate on a very interesting topic that reaches out to everyone in the world.”

#### **4. Conclusion**

We were wholly satisfied with the outcomes of the course. In assessing the module, a few issues appeared paramount to us: firstly, a virtual exchange module, or at least the one summarized here, is time-consuming and organizationally challenging, both for students and instructors. The success (or not) relies entirely on students, who are indeed its main engine; as other studies have concluded, an advantage of this pedagogy is inherently to “lower the

profile of the teacher as protagonist” (Sadler & Dooly , 2016, p.12). For this reason, however, virtual exchange requires that at least most students be willing, even enthusiastic, about participating actively and that they be committed to organizing their time according to the module’s workflow. In our case, roughly 98% percent of students in our classes decided to participate. In addition, some students inevitably carried a heavier workload to compensate for other students’ lack of commitment. Finally, students were asked to be culturally open-minded and respectful of others, as well as committed to submitting their work on time. In our case, although we had to face some of the critical issues above, such problems surfaced in a very limited number of groups.

Virtual Exchange is built upon a collaborative relationship between the instructors, which requires flexibility and understanding. Because of our different backgrounds, courses, and expertise, we were asked to work across two linked but different academic fields, while significantly modifying our own course syllabi to accommodate the module. Moreover, Virtual Exchange most typically occurs among faculty “in literature, education sciences, and cultural studies” (Cotoman, et al., 2022, p.189) rather than in Political Science, International Relations or History. Our distinct fields thus proved challenging in some respects but the necessary and resulting exchange between the instructors made the module rewarding and enriching, both for us and for our students.

Given our diverse academic fields and expertise, we claim distinct perspectives in our teaching about the international system and global changes in that system. But beyond our respective professional variations, our differences in *global perspective* shaped by our respective national identities were fundamental to our rich collaboration and exchange of ideas. Studies about the principle of “cultural distance” in virtual exchange confirm our experience that cultural distinctions between faculty are an essential principle of the intercultural experience (Boonen, Hoefnagels, & Pluymaekers, 2019).

As a few students noted, our experience suggests that virtual exchange differs significantly from studying abroad. We are persuaded by other scholars’ observations that virtual exchange does not serve as “a substitute for international student mobility.” Indeed, we would agree that the full experience of studying abroad “instills intercultural competences to an extent that a COIL project could never achieve” (Cotoman, et al., 2022, p. 190). However, we also concur with the assertion that “Virtual exchange is not ‘study abroad light’ — it’s another type of intervention” (Abdel-Kader, 2021, para. 4). Virtual exchange does indeed offer an opportunity to challenge culturally preconceived notions about others; it allows students to overcome parochialism and offers an invitation to raise intercultural awareness by asking students to share personal experiences and ideas. In addition, it fosters students’ active learning by offering a unique learning environment that enhances student resilience, organizational skills, flexibility, and knowledge of a plurality of technological tools, as well

as ability to operate in diverse environments — all of which are sure to remain significant characteristics of teaching and learning in the 21st century.

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