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What is accessibility in virtual exchange? A critical framework for research, practice, and dialogue

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Abstract

Virtual exchange, also known as telecollaboration or collaborative online international learning (COIL), has emerged as a promising modality for global learning, enhancing accessibility in higher education. Unlike traditional study abroad programs, which often exclude students with disabilities or those facing financial, time, or identity-related constraints, virtual exchange reduces physical and financial barriers, broadening access to cross-cultural learning. This paper explores the potential of virtual exchange to address accessibility challenges in the context of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and academic ableism. It also investigates the concepts of accessibility friction and the practice of virtual colonizing. By addressing dynamic and conflicting access needs at individual, institutional, and systemic levels, and fostering critical consciousness to navigate power dynamics and cultural nuances, this paper aims to promote equitable global learning experiences. It urges educators and institutions to critically reflect on their practices and policies to create more inclusive educational landscapes.

Abstract in Serbian

Virtuelna razmena je modalitet globalnog obrazovanja koji unapređuje pristupačnost visokom obrazovanju. Za razliku od tradicionalnih programa studiranja u inostranstvu, koji često isključuju studente s invaliditetom ili one koji se suočavaju sa finansijskim, vremenskim ili identitetskim ograničenjima, virtuelna razmena smanjuje fizičke i finansijske barijere, proširujući pristup inter-

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kulturnom obrazovanju. Ovaj rad istražuje potencijal virtuelne razmene da odgovori na izazove pristupačnosti u kontekstu visokog obrazovanja. Rad istražuje koncepte akademskog abelizma, univerzalnog dizajna u nastavi (UDL, tenzija pristupačnosti i virtuelne kolonizacije. Razmatrajući dinamične i konfliktne potrebe pristupa na individualnom, institucionalnom i sistemskom nivou, te negujući kritičku svest radi snalaženja u odnosima moći i kulturnim nijansama, ovaj rad teži promovisanju jednakosti u kontekstu globalnog obrazovanja. Poziva nastavnike i institucije da kritički preispitaju svoje prakse i politike kako bi stvorili inkluzivnije obrazovne prostore.

Keywords

Accessibility; global learning; virtual exchange

1. Background

In 2022, the first author of this essay, a human development professor employed at a research university in the United States, partnered with a colleague at a similar university in the Republic of Serbia, to design and implement a virtual exchange project in which students in their respective courses worked together to explore cross-cultural representations and forms of accessibility in public spaces. As the students, and often the instructors, navigated the theories and practices of disability studies in a cross-cultural context for the first time, it became increasingly evident that these same perspectives might be applicable not just to the content of the course, but also to the virtual exchange itself. Reflections on that experience led to the creation of the following critical essay, which considers the question of accessibility in virtual exchange through the intersections between the theoretical lenses of disability studies, current policy and practice in higher education, and the medium (as well as the message) of virtual exchange, each of which are defined and discussed below.

2. Making the case for accessibility in virtual exchange

The phenomenon of virtual exchange has recently emerged as a viable modality for global learning (Barbosa & Ferreira-Lopes, 2023; Potter & Bragadóttir, 2019; Rubin, 2017), building on a venerable legacy of research and practice related to the significance of college students experiencing the culture of parts of the world different from their own. Indeed, the practice of study

abroad, from which virtual exchange sprung, was designated as one of the original high impact practices (HIPs) that emerged from the large-scale, multi-institutional data project housed at Indiana University (U.S.) in the late 1980s.

Along with the other HIPs, e.g., internships, undergraduate research, writing across the curriculum, it was determined that undergraduate students who engaged in conventional forms of study abroad, i.e., intensive (semester or year-long) experiences that involved physical travel to other countries, were more likely (in statistically significant ways) to succeed in college (Haupt & Ogden, 2019; Kilgo et al., 2015; Rickard et al, 2023; Stebleton et al., 2013). This strong linkage to student success contributed to increased institutional investment in the practice, especially in those places that already had emergent, if perhaps smaller scale, strategic interest. To extend the proven benefits of success to a broader range of students, many participating universities began offering short-term study abroad opportunities alongside the more intensive modalities, which researchers determined could potentially provide similar benefits to longer-term models, with lower institutional costs and higher rates of student participation.

The HIP model, which includes study abroad/global learning, has been criticized for real and potential institutional-level inequities (Finley & McNair, 2013; Greenman et al., 2022; Hensel, 2023; Ives et al., 2023; Kinzie et al., 2020; Zilvinskis, et al., 2023). Not all students, for example, can afford, either in money or time, to spend an extended time abroad. This may be especially the case for students who have caregiver responsibilities (whether for children or parents); students who work outside of school, students whose identity may be challenged in different settings (e.g., trans-identifying) (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018), or, perhaps most salient to the present discussion, students with conditions that would inhibit either physical travel, on-ground mobility, and/or access to needed supports. Indeed, a 2020 study indicated that 11% of U.S. college students identify as having a disability, but only 8% of those who choose to study abroad identify similarly (Johnstone & Edwards, 2020).

Much of the existing research on accessibility in U.S. study abroad focuses on the challenges of physical travel and mobility, such as the provision of wheelchair ramps in a host country (Johnstone & Edwards, 2020; Link, 2016; Soneson & Cordano, 2009). Often, too, an accommodation model is utilized, where on-site information gathered is “useful for an individual student, but it can often not be applied more generally or is not shared broadly” (p. 270). To address issues of accessibility at a more systematic level, practitioners have

posited the value of short-term, *virtual* global exchanges. Advocates suggest that the virtual modality has the potential to ameliorate physical challenges while allowing for the creation of controlled, technology-mediated spaces that can be adapted to suit the needs of students with a variety of disabilities, and/or for whom the language of instruction is not their first language (e.g., translation tools), and/or for whom physical immersion may risk harm.

The practice of virtual exchange, also referred to also as telecollaboration or collaborative online international learning (COIL), existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but rose to prominence as an alternative to physical travel which had been curtailed because of global quarantines (Bali et al., 2021). In a conventional virtual exchange project, instructors from two (or more) institutions, located in different countries or cultural contexts, co-design and implement an online project in which students enrolled at both institutions work together, often using a range of virtual collaboration tools, to achieve shared outcomes (Rubin & Guth, 2023), usually as one component of a larger course or as an independent project(Giralt et al, 2022). Note that virtual exchanges can be synchronous, asynchronous, or a hybrid of the two previous modalities, depending on the circumstances influencing the participants.

Emerging research indicates that engagement in virtual exchange projects does not necessarily rise to the level of impact of a full HIP, but the lowering of physical and financial barriers is believed to have broadened access to international, cross-cultural learning opportunities to more students in more disciplines and from more places (Duffy et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2021, O'Dowd, 2025). Indeed, the practice has been billed variously as "expanding access to global learning" (Jie & Pearlman, 2018; Lanham & Voskuil, 2022); "bridging the student mobility gap" (Misra et al., 2020) and "a global experience for everyone" (Gray et al., 2021). These are big claims that invite questions of who may be included, and who may not, in the umbrella term "everyone".

3. Accessibility in higher education

While virtual exchange advocates highlight accessibility as a primary benefit, it should be noted that the meaning(s) of the related terms "access" and "accessibility" are fluid, culturally constructed, and, at times, contested (Titchkosky, 2011) as the experience with our own virtual exchange project (described above) highlighted. In the context of global higher education as a socio-economic sector, access generally refers to access to educational institutions, as in the ability of a given student to enroll and successfully

complete a degree program (McCowan, 2016). In the context of complex organizations, such as universities, the institution chooses an orientation towards accessibility, or the degree to which a given space (whether physical or virtual) is available and usable for those who operate within it.

3.1. The accommodation Model

Higher education institutions (HEIs) can choose, for example, to build accessible learning and working environments where a variety of needs and preferences are addressed to optimize performance for everyone. Alternatively, HEIs could choose to make specific accessibility accommodations on an individual basis only for students (or faculty or staff) who request them. In this model, persons with identified mental or physical disabilities, largely on their own, acquire or assemble the required documentation, locate the office responsible for processing their requests, and work with advisors to identify accommodations that minimally meet institutional policies, legal requirements, and course requirements.

This latter approach has been the subject of mounting criticism both inside and outside of higher education. Critics argue that the accommodation model is analogous to forcing a uniquely irregular shape into a slightly malleable container designed for perfect or average-sized contents. While the model may be helpful for individual students who have official diagnoses and the time and capacity to advocate for themselves, it has limited utility for students whose disabilities are undiagnosed or those who, for whatever reason, are not able to successfully navigate the process. Several multi-institutional studies have highlighted significant, and widening, gaps between the number of U.S. college students who would benefit from accessibility accommodations and those who successfully utilize the accommodation system (Lyman et al., 2016; Marshak et al., 2010).

3.2. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model

Within these inherently inequitable institutional contexts, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model has emerged to center accessibility at the course level, whether in the selection or design of course platforms, content, and assessments, a practice which is intended to benefit all students in the course, regardless of their (dis)ability status (Edwards et al., 2022; Wilson, 2017). There is consistent evidence that faculty who are trained in UDL practices obtain more equitable learning outcomes for many of their students (Bradshaw, 2020), perhaps especially in technology-mediated learning environments, but the

model is not without critics of its own (Landin & Schirmer, 2020). Several social scientists have questioned UDL's general "lack of research support" (Boysen, 2021; Murphy, 2021) and potential conflict with other psychological theories with a stronger empirical foundation. Perhaps most salient to the present argument, however, recent proponents of the humanizing education movement have suggested that the UDL model "is inadequate for addressing many of the social legacies of oppression that carry into formal educational settings" (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020, p. 1).

4. Accessibility in disability studies

Accessibility is a core concept in the interdisciplinary field of disability studies, which first emerged in the 1980s, largely among countries in the Global North. The field positions access as the counterbalance to disability, the latter broadly defined as defined "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by the political, economic and cultural norms of a society which takes little or no account of people who have impairments and thus excludes them from mainstream activity" (Barnes, 2020; p. 18). It should be noted, however, that while efforts have been made by the global health community to reach consensus on how disability is defined, important distinctions remain (Bickenbach et al., 1999; Leonardi et al., 2022; Palmer & Harley, 2012)

Disability scholars often examine the phenomenon of disability not from the perspective of an individual (such as reflected in the accommodation model described above), but rather by recognizing that the experience of disability is embedded in larger social, cultural, and political structures (Erevelles, 2014; Goodley, 2024). From their perspective, these deep-seated structures should, in turn, be examined critically to lower barriers, minimize exclusion, and generally foster equitable wellbeing (i.e., "ability") throughout a given society. In other words, in the long run, the critical stance of disability scholars is intended to be constructive, serving as the basis for sustained advocacy within the context of highly complex systems.

For the remainder of this essay, we wish to promote similarly sustained advocacy by bringing the perspectives of disability studies to bear on the phenomenon of accessibility in global virtual exchange and critically examining the larger social (academic ableism), institutional (access friction), and political (virtual decolonizing) contexts in which the practice is embedded.

4.1. Academic ableism

Recognition of the potential of virtual environments to increase access to education for students with disabilities parallels the development of instructional technologies and increased desire for online learning. Over the past decade, online learning has proven to enhance overall accessibility for students with disabilities if the courses are designed with accessibility in mind and if the instructor applies accessibility standards required by the law or expected by their institutions in their course design (Roberts et al. 2011; Betts et al., 2013; Guilbaud et al., 2021). However, these studies do not address the potential of virtual learning to challenge academic ableism.

The term *academic ableism* is coined by Jay Timothy Dolmage (2017) in the identically titled book detailing social and institutional practices that have constructed disability as an antithesis of higher education. Dolmage argues that through its positioning as a bastion of intellectual perfectionism and proponent of ability, higher education has situated disability as its opposite: an imperfection that distracts the academia from its goal to cultivate and nurture sterling intellectualism (often synonymous with physical flawlessness). As it conceptualizes itself as something 'above' disability, Dolmage writes, "academia exhibits and perpetuates a form of structural ableism." (p.53) In other words, as the institutions of higher education rely on the unspoken and unsanctioned ableist norms, they conserve ableness as a preferred standard upon which instructors and students are expected to construct the physical and pedagogical system of education. Consequently, it can be said that higher education has been founded on the ideas and practices that exclude disability.

Given that forbidding disability is a condition of the higher education system's existence, its inaccessibility precedes its accessibility. Drawing from disability studies literature, Dolmage (2017) re-asserts that the demand for access is preceded by the recognition of its lack. To put it simply, something must first be inaccessible for it to be made accessible. This ontological ordering highlights the fact that all environments are built; and that they are built in ways that are accessible for some bodies, but not for others. From this perspective, every request for accessibility exposes a feature of a structure built to deny access to one user, while enabling access to another user. Dolmage (2017) explains,

> In this way, the structural ableism of society mandates not just that structures be built only for preferred bodies, but that this preferred status be borne out and proven by all the bodies that are denied access.

> Having access, then, is not momentous for those who can easily move through these spaces. Being denied access—and pointing out this denial—creates a spectacle. Needing access is momentous. (p.54)

What sets in motion a demand for accessibility, thus, is not only the mere absence of access for a non-preferred body, but also a recognition of a flaw within the system. At the same time, each recognition of a barrier is an opportunity for its repair. But in a system laden with barriers and rooted in ableism, requests for repairs are not only innumerable but often must go unmet to preserve the system's structural norms.

Even if accessibility is occasionally increased due to official accommodation requests, common delays of accommodation approvals in the United States disadvantage students' progress, and students report on the burden of the added labor that such requests add to their study (Dali & Charbonneau, 2024). What is more, problematic faculty attitudes toward disabled students—frustration with accommodations, uncertainty leading to deflected responsibility, admiration for students who do not request support, and superficial confidence from basic training—reveal how in the US compliance-driven rather than equity-minded approaches perpetuate academic ableism (Nachman, 2025).

Academic ableism is not limited to the US context. A systematic review of 322 publications (1984-2024) identified 14 major barriers facing students with disabilities in higher education globally (Gull et al., 2025). These barriers include physical inaccessibility, discriminatory attitudes, inadequate support services, lack of trained staff, insufficient assistive technology, inflexible curricula, and mental health challenges. Students encounter difficulties accessing course materials, disclosing disabilities, and navigating rigid institutional structures. Despite institutional commitments to inclusion, systemic disadvantages persist across campus environments.

Academic ableism, thus, traps both students and faculty in cycles that impede rather than facilitate education. UDL was intended to break this cycle. Dolmage (2017) argues that if courses are originally designed for diverse learners, accommodation requests and related participation delays are minimized. However, UDL remains challenging to understand and implement. While "universality" is attractive, it remains problematic to define practically. In a "universally" designed course, one might assume every student had already submitted and been granted accommodation requests. However, students do

not submit requests during course design. Instead of communicating with students about actual needs, instructors design courses by attempting to approve anticipated requests they can imagine. The universality is thus limited to each instructor's experience with accessible design across disabilities and contexts. But instructors cannot anticipate or fulfill every request.

This limitation creates an alarming problem. When instructors aim to anticipate all learner differences, they may render differences invisible. Students whose needs are unmet face a hard choice: submit accommodation requests and expose design flaws or pretend their needs do not exist. The first option creates socially awkward and academically risky positions. The second silences them. Neither challenges the constitutive inaccessibility of higher education.

Virtual learning compounds barriers as disabled students often lack necessary "digital capital"—not merely technology access, but specific proficiencies, institutional support, and compatible systems enabling meaningful participation. Digital infrastructure meant to democratize education creates new exclusions through inaccessible websites and incompatible assistive technologies (Seale et al., 2015). When instructors apply UDL online, they face uncontrollable technical limitations—learning management systems may not support accessible alternatives, third-party content may be inaccessible, and video platforms may lack adequate captioning.

In student exchange programs, these obstacles multiply internationally. Students with disabilities encounter not only home country barriers but cross-border mobility challenges. Host institutions may lack familiarity with accommodations, language barriers complicate disclosure, and financial constraints intensify across different healthcare systems and housing markets. UDL principles, developed within single institutional contexts, struggle with variability across national education systems, cultural attitudes, and legal frameworks. Universal design's promise falters when universality must extend across borders, since inclusion is highly context dependent.

In summary, no pedagogy aiming to universalize access can thrive in environments built to include some and exclude others. To succeed, enabling approaches like virtual exchange and UDL need higher education systems built on flexible design and inclusion rather than selectivity. Simply applying inclusion principles to pedagogy within exclusive systems cannot enable universal accessibility.

4.2. Access friction

While academic ableism reinforces the ability bias within the system of higher education and UDL exposes the tension between the system's selectivity and an aspiration for universal accessibility of education, the concept of accessibility friction challenges the conventional perception of accessibility as primarily a technical activity, in which one checks off a box indicating that one has met a set of specific, often externally-mandated, requirements (Hartblay, 2017). Similarly, friction is aligned with recent advances in the scholarship of teaching and learning which argue that treating learning, or, in this case, access to learning, as a problem with a clear solution, does the process a profound disservice by denying its diversity, complexity or "messiness" (Bass, 2020; Schrum & Mårtensson, 2023).

If we view accessibility through the lens of individual accommodation, then access friction refers to the perspective of an individual who may face multiple, even compounding issues of access. In the virtual exchange context, this could describe a student for whom the language of instruction is not their first language and who perhaps also has limited vision, which would create friction when an instructor adopts visual communication to redress differences in language proficiency. If this example is multiplied by the number of students participating in each virtual exchange project, then it is likely to contribute to multiple points of friction, not all of which may be apparent to the instructor(s).

If we frame accessibility at the level of the institution or organization, then friction occurs when a service provider must navigate conflicting or competing access claims by multiple individuals or groups (Hofmann et al., 2020). In virtual exchange, this could be the instructor(s), who must navigate the access needs of groups of students, but it could also be the institutions which provide the technological infrastructure through which the virtual exchange takes place. For example, for both security and accessibility reasons, Penn State requires all courses to be moderated via institutionally-owned Zoom, with related affordance of captions in multiple languages. However, video-heavy Zoom can present technological accessibility challenges in countries that are digitally impoverished, i.e. have limited intranet bandwidth and/or students who are less familiar with the capabilities of video-based communication. It should be noted that the same friction exists with more open-access video collaboration platforms, such as Google Meet or BigBlueButton.

Accessibility friction also extends beyond physical (or digital) attributes, but rather it also is about the meaning of such spaces, a form of perceived

hospitality (or lack thereof) (Middleton & Spinney, 2019). According to Borg et al. (2010), accessibility can be framed as "the interaction between a person and his or her environment" and friction "can be used as a simple measure of how facilitating an environment is" (p. 7). Drawing on the lens of ableism, friction serves as both an implicit and explicit social critique of the neo-liberal emphasis on developing public infrastructure around a standardized, arguably homogenized, image of an able-bodied person (Velho, 2021). As Hamraie (2017, p. 129) notes, "for those of us whose bodies do not follow these smooth, predictable temporalities, [our] ways of being and moving find friction with our social and built environments." The latter sentence could be extended to include virtual spaces as well.

From this perspective, a video collaboration room is not a universally accessible space. Rather, it is built to suit the needs of an imagined person with a particular set of characteristics and purposes, which may be experienced very differently across the diverse global audiences that are increasingly engaging in virtual exchanges. Framed this way, the video collaboration space (often a black box) is the locus of multiple and dynamic layers of accessibility friction (Hartblay, 2017). As Cassandra Hartblay notes, as "the concept of accessible design circulates globally, the accessibility ramp becomes an object that exists in global friction, taking up different, but interlocking, local meanings" (p. 7). Used in this way, accessibility friction becomes more closely related to agitation, activism, and even dissent against prevalent and culturally derived assumptions of friction-less spaces and places (Ellis et al., 2015; Hamraie, 2017).

5. Virtual colonizing

The entire project of global education could be understood as a friction-laden vehicle that simultaneously increases interdependence between worlds' communities and advances historical imperialism, colonialism, and the capitalist world economy (Jackson, 2016). Indeed, if we frame the accessibility challenge not at the level of the individual student, instructor, or institution, but by country, region or even world system, then the challenge becomes one not only of which nation states are (or are not) participating, but rather the relative balance of power among them. Many definitions of virtual exchange emphasize the reciprocity of these exchanges, often describing them as "partnerships", a term which papers over the very real differences in rank, lived experience, language, power, and privilege between instructors (and students) from different parts of the world.

From this perspective, the argument for greater access to global learning through virtual exchange is predicated on the presumption that the primary barriers to participation are a lack of financial support and/or limited technological infrastructure. This deficit framing belies a subtle power differential of its own, in that it presumes that global learning is a shared goal, and that the only reason a given country may not be participating is because it cannot, not because it may choose not to do so. Indeed, the phrase "global learning for all" implies a universal valuation, based on the assumption that global learning is a public good which benefits all individuals, institutions, and the larger world they inhabit. Seen another way, there are many places, and people, who do not hold positive views of the liberalism of global engagement, nor do they see its fulfillment as inevitable. In some cases, for example, exposure to global perspectives may be perceived as a threat to existing cultural beliefs and/or heritage; For others, it serves to entrench rather than loosen existing hierarchies between and among countries.

This phenomenon is not new, nor would it be the first time education has been used to serve larger geo-political purposes. As mentioned previously, globalization has been strongly associated with the history of both imperialism and colonialism. The latter have both been frequently justified in universal terms, ranging from natural law to the principle of science, which critics argue served as smokescreens for exercises of highly partisan power and authority. According to these critics, global learning, can serve as an expanded version of Said's Orientalism, in which "a structured set of concepts, assumptions, and discursive practices that were used to produce, interpret, and evaluate knowledge about [other] peoples" (Kohn & Ready, 2024, p. 5; Li, 2020. This is evident even in naming practices, as the term commonly used to describe the practice, i.e., "virtual exchange" is drawn from the English language, as is its frequent synonym, "Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)" which was coined by a U.S. university.

Critical consciousness serves as a vehicle to counteract colonizing tendencies such as these. As mentioned previously, a video collaboration room, the commonly used tool for synchronous virtual exchange, is not a politically neutral space. As just one example, the companies that owns Zoom is based in a (highly progressive) region of the United States and its use is proprietary, e.g. requires a relatively expensive institutional license to utilize fully, as does its competitor, Microsoft Teams. While Google Meet is an open-source tool, it lacks many of the robust features of its for-profit rivals. The design for each of these

tools is based on use-cases primarily from U.S. companies and schools, including the interface, hardware integration, and other features. When students from a country outside of the U.S. meet online in a Zoom room, a Teams session, or a Google meeting space, it could be argued that they, in effect, enter a largely U.S. owned and defined space. Even BigBlueButton, while more globally created, is led by a former U.S. Olympic athlete.

In another sense, however, the video collaboration space does function more as a blank slate, in that it strips away most other forms of cultural context, outside of perhaps a few glimpses of a classroom or bedroom in the background. This means that, in a virtual exchange, when students from one university engage with students from another in a virtual space, they are, in a sense, performing their culture in front of an audience without many of its usual "props". This inevitably affects how that culture is enacted by the student representatives as well as how tnon-representatives receive it. It can be presumed, for example, that students from one country have some sense of what the students in the other know or believe about their culture, and they pattern their virtual exchanges accordingly. In other words, the video collaboration space introduces a potential layer of inauthenticity, one in which access to other cultures is mediated not just through technology, but also through complex, even conflicting or contested, political acts of cultural representation that differ in potentially significant ways from in-person encounters.

6. Conclusion

This essay has presented a critical view of accessibility claims in the practice of virtual exchange, drawing from the broader social, cultural, and political lenses of disability studies. While the analysis suggests limitations and challenges to achieving full accessibility in the VE context, it should be recognized that the rise of virtual exchange as a global learning modality has significantly enhanced the accessibility and inclusivity of international education. By lowering financial, physical, and personal barriers, virtual exchange provides a viable alternative to traditional study abroad programs, enabling more students to engage in cross-cultural learning. This shift aligns with broader efforts to address inequities in higher education, particularly for students with disabilities, by designing virtual environments that prioritize accessibility from the outset. When approached in this way, virtual exchange

has the potential to mitigate academic ableism by redefining the standards of participation and success in higher education.

Furthermore, the concept of accessibility friction offers a critical lens through which to view teaching practice, especially the complexities of creating inclusive educational environments. It highlights the diverse and often conflicting needs of individuals and institutions, emphasizing the need for flexible, context-specific solutions. At a broader organizational level, virtual exchange programs must navigate intricate power dynamics and cultural nuances, ensuring that they do not perpetuate existing inequalities. By fostering critical consciousness and addressing these challenges, educators and institutions can work towards genuinely inclusive and equitable global learning experiences.

Beyond these implications for practice, there are also implications for the emerging body of scholarship focused on virtual exchange. We join the voices of other scholars who are examining the VR experience through the lenses of the unique lived experiences of student (also faculty, staff) participants. As Gordon-Chipembere et al. (2024) notes, VE research to date is characterized by "an absence of any discussion/assessment relating to racial/ethnic identity, religious identity, LGBTQ2+ students, or students with disabilities" (p. 25). This suggests that we can most effectively advocate for the proliferation of virtual exchange modalities not by making universal claims but rather by studying the different, often complex, pathways students may take through the process, an approach that often lends itself to qualitative methods. Scholars can also work to identify structural or systematic barriers to participation that can potentially be reduced or even eliminated through instructional design, institutional policy, and/or social change, each of which can be assessed through empirical, even generalizable, approaches. It should also be recognized that virtual exchange may not be for everyone, and that should not be the only goal that the VE research agenda serves.

Even in acknowledging this limitation, it should be emphasized that this essay is not intended to dissuade participation or disparage those who have embraced virtual exchange as a modality of global learning. Rather, the authors seek for this piece to serve as form of critical consciousness raising, so that those instructors who engage in virtual exchange (and the institutions that support them) do not, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuate practices that enable ableism or dominance of their own culture over that of others. The paper also seeks to invite reflexive dialogues about the intersections of power, ability, language,

and technology that characterize policy and practice as it relates to the proliferation of globalized virtual learning spaces.

It seems appropriate to adopt a stance not only of cultural sensitivity, but also of a distinctive form of humility when working in these spaces. There is much that is not only unknown but which may ultimately prove to be unknowable about the virtual modality as a mediator of cultural exchange and facilitator of global learning. It could be expected that any global space would have to be a complex one, and the most likely outcome is not that virtual exchange will eclipse other forms of global learning, but rather it will join others that arose before and will arise after to provide an increasingly multi-valent and multi-faceted repertoire of means of access and accessibility, as diverse as the people and places that comprise it.

Ethical approval

This study did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) review, as it is a conceptual paper involving no human subjects or empirical data collection.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Data availability statement

No data were generated or analyzed in the preparation of this article, as it is a theoretical and conceptual work drawing solely on published literature.

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