

It is extremely humbling, actually, after having used the term Critical Virtual Exchange for the first time in my keynote at the International Virtual Exchange Conference 2020, which we had to hold online because of the pandemic, and hosted by Newcastle University to see that four years down the line, there are entire EU funded projects about Critical Virtual Exchange.

So thank you very much for having me, as they say in the in the UK. It's very humbling to do work in this space. I'm very grateful. Thank you. Now when I gave a title, for my talk, I think I should have practiced what I usually preach these days. And that is exercising a bit of epistemological humility in my work and in the way I express myself.

I somehow should have used the expression which you now see here on the slide, 'Gesturing towards Critical Virtual Exchange', which describes an intention rather than a fait accompli. And it's also more in the spirit of ROCKET, which is about developing a working concept of Critical Virtual Exchange. And 'gesturing towards' is a phrase that acknowledges that we are not quite there yet, that we still have some way to travel before we achieve Virtual Exchange through the social justice and inclusion lens that is Critical Virtual Exchange. The phrase 'gesturing towards' is not my phrase. It is often used by a group of scholars who focus on critical aspects of decolonizing global citizenship education. We are talking about Andreotti and Stein, who want to signal that we can only gesture towards the direction of decolonization and that we will undoubtedly make mistakes in the process.

But we also will discover new opportunities for learning. And it is in this spirit that I offer 'Gesturing towards Critical Virtual Exchange'. Now, these are my talking points. I will of course not tell you what Virtual Exchange is - second bullet point. But I will share with you what we know or what we think we know about Virtual Exchange.

And I will touch on Virtual Exchange and internationalization of the curriculum, global citizenship education, for sure. But I will also talk about challenges, with regard to inclusion and exclusion and colonial approaches. And then I will share with you my framework, but more importantly, its theoretical underpinnings. And after all this cognitive lifting in the first half of my talk, it will become very applied in the second half.

And I will finish off by saying a few words about what the implications are for practice, but much more importantly for research, if we carry on our journey on the path of Critical Virtual Exchange. But before I start proper, I would like to say something about my positionality. That is the place I'm speaking from in the spirit of Menezes De Souza, who wants us to contribute to the localization and decolonization of scholarly knowledge, in this case in the field of Virtual Exchange

as an instantiation of online learning and teaching. I'm obviously a white female academic. I'm located in Europe and have lived and worked in Germany, in the UK and in the United States, and I've been practicing and researching Virtual Exchange both inside and outside language education, in higher education, but mostly in the Global North. And I have only recently begun to systematically unpick some of the assumptions and the ideologies in online and distance learning in teaching, including Virtual Exchange.

I'm aware of the fact, and I would like to explicitly acknowledge, that I speak from a position of privilege.

So this is to frame my contribution. Okay, what's the overall context? Let me start with a quote. For teachers in societies that are becoming increasingly diverse, the question becomes how to prepare the students and citizens who can engage with complex issues in a way that reflects equity and justice. So how can teachers best prepare learners for a gentle and equitable and inclusive engagement in these complex societies and environments?

And you know, I know that Virtual Exchange is increasingly being proposed as an educational intervention that can assist us in tackling exactly this challenge. Now, Virtual Exchange is also increasingly promoted as "the" solution to Internationalization at Home - a term that was coined in 1998 by Bengt Nilsson at Malmö University in Sweden, when the growing immigrant population made it clear that there was a need for intentional intercultural learning between domestic and international students. What you see on the slide is, is a definition of Internationalization at Home.

I'm sure all of you are familiar with the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments. And now, Virtual Exchange is also increasingly promoted as a vehicle for Global Citizenship Education. And here we have the Unesco definition: Global Citizenship Education - an educational intervention or educational interventions that empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, to a more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world.

And here is the first moment where I invite you to exercise a bit of criticality in the spirit of Critical Virtual Exchange. Scholars like Stein, like Andreotti, you who have coined that phrase, "gesturing towards", question such understanding of global

citizenship education because of their focus on self-improvement, the development of leadership skills to save the world rather than tackling the economic and the cultural roots of the inequalities in the way, power and wealth and labor are distributed globally. They - in wisdom I think -

"we" should explicitly challenge hegemonic discourses, the masking of global complexity, and the perpetuation in education of colonial ideologies. And they encourage us - these scholars encourage us to think otherwise. So apart from "gesturing towards" if you take thinking otherwise away from here today, you'd make me very happy.

Okay, the alternative - Critical Global Citizenship Education. Scholars like Andreotti and Stein promote critical approaches to global citizenship education with notions of power, voice, and difference at the core. This is an approach that is informed by their understanding of critical literacy as a level of reading, a level of reading the word and the world that involves the development of skills of critical engagement and reflexivity.

And of course, "reading the word and the world"- that draws on Freire's work. Critical Global Citizenship Education, according to Andreotti, enables learners to engage in the analysis and critique of the relationships among perspectives, language, power, social groups and social practices. And I see a clear interface between critical approaches to Internationalization at Home, Critical Global Citizenship Education, the decolonization of the curriculum through VE, and Critical Virtual Exchange.

But let's start with what we know about Virtual Exchange.

It's a pedagogically - we are talking about pedagogically-structured online collaborative learning between groups of students who are in different cultural contexts and/or geographical locations, so across time zones and geographical distance. It combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue with the broad reach of digital technology. You know, it's a strong catalyst in advancing the internationalization of higher education curricula that it can prepare for, that it can deepen, that it can book, and that it can extend or even emulate physical exchanges. This, that it prepares students for the globalized digital workplace.

And that is probably the most important aspect for all of us - that it promotes, transversal skills like problem solving, teamwork, but also curiosity, empathy, conflict transformation. And that it is hopefully what will enable students to engage with these complex issues that I've mentioned right at the beginning of my talk. But - of course, as always a but - we know that Virtual Exchange is often not available to everybody at the higher education institutions so that it is not inherently equitable and inclusive, and it can, in fact, reproduce or perpetuate existing exclusion or create new digital inequalities, for example.

And as my colleague Francesca Helm has pointed out, it is prone to Western hegemonic and colonial approaches. The terms under which the exchanges take place can be influenced by the teaching partner's academic position, by their linguistic competence and linguistic competence of

their students, access to and experience with the use of technology, there can be institutional constraints.

Often educators are not supported. What they do is not acknowledged, is certainly not rewarded. And there can be issues related to gender, race, age, and, of course increasingly now, geopolitical challenges.

And - and this is also very important, and it's not new - Selwyn and Facer have pointed that out over a decade or exactly a decade ago now - there is the ongoing underestimation of the political and social dimension of technology use. An ongoing lack of awareness of the power dynamics that are created by educational practices, including Virtual Exchange, that the ongoing prioritization of certain knowledges, marginalization of other knowledges, and as a result of that, the reinforcement of social and epistemic injustices and colonial perspectives.

And all of this applies, unfortunately, to Virtual Exchange as well. Now, the first people who have conceptualized Virtual Exchange through the equality, diversity, inclusion, and access lens, are our colleagues from the Stevens initiative, actually, Kastler and Lewis, and in 2021. They talk about the need for equitable partnerships with partners from all demographics. They want to prioritize the creation of inclusive resources - very much

in the spirit of Rocket - you, with your approach to creating Open Educational Resources out of your project. They talk about equitable training and support, equitable support for exchange implementers - that is us, the educators. They talk about prioritizing activities that explore social challenges and social justice topics as part of the exchange dialogue that the students engage in, and they talk about exchanges that are explicitly designed to serve all participating partners rather than the community of the leading partner, which is unfortunately still often the case.

And they talk about finding - to that effect - finding common issues, to tackle issues that are relevant at both ends, so to speak. And the need to customize exchange project, to local realities and bring those local realities into the exchange dialogs among the students. And then, of course, the need to carefully consider the technology choices to ensure equitable access.

I always talk about the lowest common denominator in terms of bandwidth as a starting point for Critical Virtual Exchange. Okay, so out of this, I made the first attempt at the framework, which at the time had four pillars as I just mentioned. The use of low bandwidth technologies, Exchanges that specifically target student populations that are traditionally underrepresented in study abroad or internationalization at home programs, those from low socio economic backgrounds.

A systematic alignment of Virtual Exchange project outcomes with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Although I've started to critique myself a little bit on that one as well, because let's not forget, the Sustainable Development Goals are also a global North concept that has been imposed on the rest of the world. And, a systematic inclusion of local outreach activities.

So if possible, make sure that students, as part of the Virtual Exchange, or the Critical Virtual Exchange, and the localization of the projects are in touch with local businesses, NGOs, charities, nonprofit organizations and bring the work with those entities into the exchange dialog. That was the first iteration, and then I came up with an updated framework that explicitly includes translanguaging approaches in Virtual Exchange.

And I'm not talking about code switching. I'm talking, and this is not limited to exchanges where the learning and teaching of languages and cultures is the focal point. Not at all. Translanguaging means that you use all the modes that are available to make meaning and to communicate in your exchange. It can be visual, whatever, can be mash ups, anything you can use to make meaning and to communicate, including language in the traditional sense, so that we know that we promote and also help support participants in using what I call their full semiotic meaning making budget during exchange.

And so help them at the same time to develop their full multimodal communicative potential.

And it is in this sense that I see Critical Virtual Exchange as a putting into practice an instantiation of critical global citizenship education, and at least part of the answer to the question that I raised at the beginning of my talk. How can we prepare students and citizens who can engage with complex issues in ways that reflect equity and justice?

An instantiation of critical global citizenship education in Andreotti's sense that has notions of power, of voice, of difference at its core, and that requires critical engagement, reflexivity and unlearning and re-learning. I see it as a vehicle Critical Virtual Exchange for action, for public engagement, for sociopolitical change, as an educational intervention that allows us to address social justice, inclusion, coloniality at both individual level and institutional level.

And who knows, maybe one day, also at educational policy level. That is my big dream.

More about theoretical underpinnings. I also see Critical Virtual Exchange informed by but also informing critical digital literacy. And here I'm drawing mostly on the work of Ron Darvin. He says Critical Digital Literacy examines how the operation of power within digital contexts shapes knowledge, shapes identities, shapes social relations and formations in ways that privilege some and marginalize others.

But it also equips the learners with the tools to examine the linguistic and the nonlinguistic features. Here the modes and the meaning making come in that I've been talking about. So equipping learners with the tools to examine the linguistic and the nonlinguistic features of digital media. To identify embedded biases and assumptions particularly relevant in relation to Critical AI Literacy Skills.

And let me just say, in square brackets, I do think Critical Virtual Exchange is the ideal context to teach and learn Critical Generative AI Literacy Skills. But we can talk about this later. Why? Because we are by default in a technology mediated context, just in brackets, but critical digital literacy. and here comes the bit that touches me most, also leverages digital technologies for social justice orientated action and change.

And I also see Critical Virtual Exchange as being informed by, but also through what we do - through our practice. Informing critical diversity, literacy, which is an analytical orientation that is the work of Melissa Steyn at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. It's an analytical orientation that allows us to read social relations, as you would read a text, to recognize the ways in which possibilities are opening up for us, or closing down on us, depending on where and how we are positioned in a specific social context.

Steyn, Melissa Steyn, she wants us to look more systematically at the way in which differences get constructed within social dynamics, the social dynamics of unequal power relations in particular, which in turn are responsible for the fact that some people get systematically advantaged in this world, while others are being systematically disadvantaged because of the way their differences are being framed and understood and perpetuated.

In her critical diversity framework, Steyn consider a whole series of criteria. And I invite you to engage with her framework. But I've picked those who I believe are most relevant for Virtual Exchange and that potentially most achievable through Critical Virtual Exchange. That is an understanding that social identities are learned and an outcome of social practices.

The possession or the acquisition and then possession of a diversity grammar and vocabulary that facilitates discussions about privilege, marginalization, oppression, and the ability to translate, that is, to see through and interpret coded hegemonic practices like the ones I've mentioned earlier.

Now, what all of these theoretical framings for Critical Virtual Exchange have in common - so we are talking about critical global citizenship education, critical digital literacy, critical diversity literacy - what they have in common is their concern with issues related to socio-political and

economic power, or power imbalances, and their impact on an individual's agency, more specifically, their critical consciousness and agency.

In the spirit of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, that is, the ability to read the word critically and to act in the world to change it, that is so brilliantly captured in André Giroux's concept of Critical Agency. And I'm proposing Critical Virtual Exchange, that is, Virtual Exchange through this social justice, equity and inclusion lens is an ideal approach to decolonizing the curriculum, to decolonizing learning and teaching across the curriculum, to doing Virtual Exchange through the social justice and inclusion lens.

That was the cognitive lifting. Now it's going to become applied. I have several examples. You can stop me. I don't know how I'm doing for time, but you know me, I can I can go on forever. These are very, very different examples. And please keep in mind, I'm not saying anymore this is Critical Virtual Exchange. All I'm saying is this is gesturing towards Critical Virtual Exchange.

This is my all time favorite: Reading the City and Making Your City Sustainable. It's Malin's work. I'm sure she is a scholar you will meet in your lifetime, as you're working on Critical Virtual Exchange. Here we had undergraduate students from three different disciplines, multimodal communications students from Argentina, tourism students from Poland, and teacher education students from Sweden.

They work in ten international teams. They used English as a lingua franca. They engaged in synchronous and asynchronous interactions, and it was about a critical exploration of their respective urban environments through the lens of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal number 11, which is about making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. There were two iterations. I mean, there were more iterations but here I'm focusing on two iterations of this Virtual Exchange. The participants were encouraged to use multimodal and multilingual resources to convey meaning in their online interactions. So this is one where gesturing towards this translanguaging approach, although officially English was the lingua franca. So in the first iteration, let's go straight to Task 2.

After the warm up, the icebreaker, in the second task, they explored the potentials of multimodal meaning making by sharing and critically analyzing popular and official websites of their respective cities, the places they were living in, with the focus on the stories and the values that these official websites were promoting. And then in the subsequent task, they had to select and to share examples of how their cities figured in esthetic texts, in literature, in poetry, in music.

The idea was that they should identify critical or controversial issues that, of course, would not feature on the sites that they had worked with in Task 2, in the previous step of the exchange. And then finally, that was the collaborative part of this project, they worked in their

cross-cultural teams and designed their own multimodal city texts based on a critical theme that they had chosen in each group, and that was relevant in each of their city contexts. It could be something on segregation or poverty or crime and prejudice, whatever they chose, something that they depicted was actually an issue, a challenge in their city context. So this was the localization dimension. Also, they could not go out. There was no local outreach. It was 2020, let's not forget.

So it all happened literally online. Also their local work happened online. Now in the second iteration of that project, the three educators decided to put a stronger emphasis on this critical agency, Freire, Giroux, spirit Critical agency, dimension and critical digital citizenry. So here the students were asked to research sustainability issues in their respective urban settings.

And again, explicitly the question How is sustainable Development Goal number 11 addressed in your city? Where do you see opportunities and challenges? And in this iteration, the students co-created sustainability campaigns, multimodal sustainability campaigns on topics that were relevant in each of their cities. So again, localized. And here you just see the logos of the campaigns.

So it reaches from safety for women in their urban spaces via beekeeping, via environmental means of transport. A lot of, cycling, walking, but then also resources, how to preserve water resources and other natural resources in their cities. All this has been written up by Malin in the Journal of Virtual Exchange.

So if you want to explore this further, that's where you'll find her publication. Another example, very different: Youth Entrepreneurship for Society project. These are the two Anas, Ana Sevilla-Pavón and Anna Nicolaou. Their exchange is at the same time a very interesting model for new local employer / Higher education collaborations to support employability through Virtual Exchange or Critical Virtual Exchange.

Here you had Business Communication and Management students from Cyprus and Spain working together. They were both studying English for specific purposes. And one of the aims was to develop the famous 21st century skills, linguistic skills, intercultural skills, digital skills, teamwork skills, you name it. The higher education engagement offices in both their institutions, helped them to do this local outreach work, linked them up with local associations and offices of nongovernmental organizations.

They then, with those people, discussed the issues that they were dealing with, the challenges that we are trying to resolve in their local communities. They proposed their own ways, approaches to tackling these issues and then presented their initiatives in the shape of digital campaigns and digital elevator pitches in an online social entrepreneurship fair.

A very, very different example from the VALIANT project, which is focused on supporting teachers of Ukrainian refugees. I don't know, you may have heard of VALIANT. It was a teacher education Virtual Exchange project. Robert O'Dowd was the principal investigator. They had their capstone conference in February this year. Some of you may have been there.

They developed ready made exchanges, actually, off the shelf ones, that you can use and adapt and implement. So also an open educational resource actually. This project brought together pre and in-service teachers from across Europe. Also that particular strand of the project brought together pre and in-service teachers from across Europe who were working with or who were preparing to work with Ukrainian students, displaced Ukrainian students in their classrooms.

So the participants had invited expert speakers, who could help them to focus on the specific needs of these displaced Ukrainian students. They also had sessions on trauma-informed teaching. And they wanted to hear about what was going on in Ukraine from Ukrainian scholars and teachers. So here the focus was very much on collaboration, community building, community of practice with colleagues from across Europe for ongoing support and resource sharing even after the completion of the VALIANT project.

And the outcome is, and this is an open educational resource, you may want to spread the word about among your colleagues if it's relevant. It is a set of resources for supporting teachers of Ukrainian refugees. This is a very complex one. I can talk about this later, but my voice is going so I don't know.

Have you heard about LIVELAB International? Would you like to hear about it? Then I have to do a bit of reading because this is a complex one, but it is a very interesting one. The principles of this project. It is located in Belgium, by the way. Or the headquarters are in Belgium.

The main principles of the project are interprofessional, international, virtual and, again, community service learning. So again there is this applied, this outreach dimension to it. The students can take classes with an international group. The idea is to experience cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaborations. There is an authentic community setting in each of the courses. So the students engage with a real life challenge.

But that challenge is approached from an interprofessional point of view. And there are two different tracks. There is a global and fully online track, and there is a European focused, blended intensive program, a BIP version, of it. LIVELAB is a project that has been developed in cooperation with partner institutions of higher education, of the Network: Towards Unity for Health.

They have a strong health focus in LIVELAB, a health education focus and a network of European partner universities and universities of applied sciences. This collaboration has led to three courses for students. If you look on the right hand side, which is Global Opportunities, they talk about the ISTEP courses, International Student Training and Exchange Program course. ISTEP.

And the second one is Innovative Cities International Student Training and Exchange Program on Innovative and Adaptive Healthy Cities. This course focuses on interprofessional cooperation and exchange of information, observations and actions, case management specifically, the active and participative involvement of the patient. The beauty of this is that after each ISTEP course, the students can participate in the yearly international conference organized by one of the participating partner institutions.

In 2022, there were more than 300 students from 50 partner countries involved in ISTEP courses, and these countries included Sudan, Indonesia, India, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Arab Emirates, Ireland, Kurdistan, Colombia. I mean, it is really worth finding out about LIVELAB International as a source of inspiration. So here the students have eight monthly online sessions and the students work together in interprofessional and international teams of different subject areas.

And each time they take part in a webinar on the specific topic by an expert, after that, they discuss their own findings that they prepared in relation to the topic, and discuss this in these international interprofessional teams. They are also given an assignment, linked to the presented - a follow up. These assignments are carried out in the local teams, but the outcomes are then uploaded to an online platform.

There they get peer assessed by the others. The other strand on the left hand side, the LIVELAB International Collaboration with European institutions of higher education has led so far to two Blended Intensive Programs and the second one, Sustainable and Smart Inclusive Healthy Cities, is the one that maps the one on the right hand side, the international one.

So BIP in Sustainable and Smart Healthy Cities, the Belgium VIVES University of Applied Sciences, the Spain University of Murcia, the Portugal Instituto Superior de Engenharia, Polytechnico de Coimbra, the University of Grenoble, the Greek University of Attica. These are very, very, very rich consortia, it's a very ambitious project. Finally, and this is just a concept note on, and again, a very different...

I'm almost there. Wonderful. I'll be finished in three minutes. A concept note I'm developing with two colleagues. Osvaldo Succi from Brazil, [unintelligible] and José Luis Jiménez-Figarotti from Venezuela, the Universidad Católica of Andrés Bello. They want their students to prepare 3 to 4

minute narrated documentaries exploring one of the critical issues faced by the Yanomami people who live at the Brazilian-Venezuelan border.

So this is a tribe that is distributed across the border. They want to leverage various generative AI applications during the creation process, from the research to the script development and the production. The idea is that they engage the students in the critical analysis of the generative AI application, something like NotebookLM for example, and that they look at the effectiveness and limitations and the potential biases in addressing complex social and cultural topics - in this case, the fate of these people who live on the Brazil-Venezuela border.

So while they're using the generative AI application to collate the information, to sort the information and to organize the presentation of the information, they want the students to evaluate what happens with the information on their journey, what is foregrounded, what gets maybe lost, what might not be there?

What do we have to look for elsewhere? Do we have the complete picture if we rely on an application like NotebookLM to support this work? And this is why I said earlier, I see Critical Virtual Exchange is an ideal context to train in critical AI literacy skills as a subset of critical digital literacy skills in the context of the exchanges.

Then they jointly produce a short, informative documentary while at the same time hopefully developing a nuanced understanding of generative AI's role in digital content creation and curation, and its implications for representing sociocultural and sociopolitical challenges like those faced by the people who belong to this tribe. Okay, what's the takeaway? Thank you for listening. I am convinced more than ever that Critical Virtual Exchange can create new legacies, but this is based on an understanding of research as living knowledge, praxis knowledge that connects ours and our students lived experiences on the ground with the body of global critical knowledge in global citizenship education, in critical global citizenship education, in critical internationalization at home, and that it can in that way, make a contribution to this critical dimension of global citizenship education. I also believe that it can that we can, that our students can, one project at a time, effect real change locally and eventually globally through Critical Virtual Exchange project, their project work.

I do hope I have managed to convince you that it is an inclusive, that it is a sustainable, and it is also a scalable educational intervention, that it is a strategy for critical internationalization of the curriculum for critical internationalization at home, and that it can instigate transformative change at institutional level, but much more importantly, at the individual level.

And hopefully, as I said earlier, eventually one day also at educational and policy level. And as Malin has put it so nicely, I also believe that it will allow us to move from safe, hegemonic

versus brave nonhegemonic Virtual Exchange where learners will engage in thinking otherwise.
Thank you.