Understanding Power, Pedagogy, and Praxis: Geopolitical Dimensions of a Critical Literacy Virtual Exchange Project between Ukrainian and American Professors

Ekaterina Midgette & Olivia G. Stewart, St. John's University

Abstract

Virtual Exchange projects involving countries experiencing geopolitical instability impel participating faculty and students to examine multidimensional assumptions and disrupt the discourses of the post-truth era through experiential engagement in the realities of global education. This study examines the perspectives of Ukrainian and American faculty (n=6) as they collaborated on a seven-week, online critical digital literacies project involving 42 students during the Russia-Ukraine war. The aim of the collaboration was to foster a critically engaged, cross-cultural learning environment in which students from diverse backgrounds could interrogate multimodal texts through the lenses of power, politics, and culture in online heterogeneous groups. Through perspectives of international and interdisciplinary faculty, this action research examines how co-creation and cultural negotiation in online teaching were reshaped by geopolitical instability. Findings indicated that the real-world context of the ongoing war fostered global solidarity and unique experiences of collaboration, humanization, and adaptability. It also exposed uncomfortable issues of inclusion and equity in global learning and raised questions about the limits of internationalization within higher education systems rooted in Western tradition.

Keywords: *Teacher education, reflection, criticality, intercultural competence, online learning environment*

Introduction

Critical theory and research have been essential in illuminating the distinct needs, assets, and ways of knowing within particular communities while also exposing the systemic oppression or violence many have historically endured. Such work is vital for recognizing and valuing diverse ontologies and epistemologies and for interrogating how one's own positionalities and subjective constructions of the world shape research practices and continue to privilege Western knowledge systems (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Luke et al., 2011). As institutions of higher education in the U.S. are rapidly losing autonomy in supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion, the interdependence of criticality in teaching and learning and the principles of democracy have become indispensable, making pedagogies that de-center Western experience and ways of knowing essential for cultivating advocacy for equity and inclusion in a democratic society.

In this study, we explore the affordances of Virtual Exchange (VE) pedagogy as a platform for critical education. VE programs offer spaces for instructors and students to collaborate in multicultural and critical environments, fostering the development of critical self-reflection, cultural competencies, and greater global awareness (Dietrich, 2022). Intentionally integrating criticality into VE experiences can transcend the boundaries of a single course, transforming it into an active participation in the ongoing stand-off between knowledge systems rooted in positions of authority and those grounded in equitable epistemologies (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006).

VEs are often positioned as equitable and accessible forms of international collaboration that provide opportunities for global learning and intercultural interactions without the need for travel (Bloomquist et al., 2022). This expansion of pedagogical ecosystems challenges traditional study-abroad exchange models, which have been known to favor young, able-bodied students supported by their middle-class families with college degrees (Oswal et al., 2021). VE projects that combine critical thinking with global learning experiences are becoming increasingly valuable in promoting democratic values in higher education, as they move away from framing this pedagogy solely within traditional language learning contexts that often promulgate the superiority of Western languages (Midgette & Stewart, 2025). Moreover, VE is viewed as a pedagogy that confronts the discourse of the post-truth era (Nash, 2024), giving participants the opportunity to experientially evaluate "alternative facts" (e.g., Russian state media portrayal of its invasion of Ukraine).

This study examines the perspectives of Ukrainian and American faculty as they collaborated in an online, asynchronous critical digital literacies VE project amidst the Russia-Ukraine war. Through diverse perspectives represented by international and interdisciplinary faculty, this study offers a conceptualization of how the practices of co-creation and cultural negotiation are transformed and evolved in a VE community through the participants' experiences with the effects of the macro levels of internationalization (Seeber et al., 2016). We explore our experiences as sites of knowledge that are potential acts of liberation (hooks, 1994) and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). We organize our findings around two interrelated dimensions: (1) how power operated through institutional, epistemic, and geopolitical conditions, and (2) how instructors enacted critical praxis in response to these constraints. Our findings invite educators to consider the role of instructor reflexivity and critical praxis in global learning projects conducted amid the realities of conflict (Dietrich, 2022).

Geopolitical Instability in VE Partnerships

VEs have traditionally sought to transform participants' worldviews by challenging cultural assumptions through interaction with international peers (O'Dowd, 2015, 2025). In contexts of military conflict, however, VE becomes more complex, as participants navigate challenges associated with teaching and learning under duress alongside more typical constraints such as technology and time zones (Midgette & Stewart, 2025). Several studies have indicated that in such contexts, participants often draw on humanizing and reflective practices to respond to uncertainty. For example, Dietrich (2022), reflecting on the VE conducted between TESOL students in the U.S. and their peers in Afghanistan amid violence and uncertainty, noted that the project fostered empathy, adaptability, and critical cultural awareness while building technological and pedagogical confidence. Similarly, Bloomquist et al.'s (2022) virtual collaboration between a U.S. university and a teacher college in South Sudan, grounded in Freire's pedagogy of hope (2004), illustrates leveraging self-efficacy and reflective practice for advancing continuous learning despite destruction and danger surrounding Sudanese educators participating in the project.

Criticality serves as a useful lens for examining how VE partnerships can foster mutual understanding between communities and countries in conflict, foregrounding the interrogation of dominant and underlying power structures, ideologies, and inequities (Freire, 1970; Luke & Woods, 2009). Ganassin and colleagues (2021) analyzed the implementation of a VE between university students and faculty in the UK and China, examining biases related to establishing sustainable partnerships in non-Western societies governed by centralized authorities. Their study emphasized the potential of VEs to foster a collaborative international effort to navigate biases shaped by propaganda, political influences, and limited access to uncensored information. Additionally, Bagci et al. (2021) demonstrated that structured, mediated online interactions between members of conflicting communities, grounded in critical reflection on one's biases, can reduce anxiety and miscommunication while transforming the "us versus them" mindset into a greater mutual understanding. These examples of awareness and intentionality in overcoming otherness in partnerships expand our understanding of VE as a tool for co-creating transformative spaces that address systemic and ideological divisions, deepen awareness of the complexity of global experience, and foster intercultural understanding through reflective and dialogic collaboration.

The collaborative project between Ukrainian and American faculty, highlighted in this manuscript, integrated reflexivity and open communication into its design to encourage participants' individual and collaborative reflection on co-designing and teaching amid the ongoing uncertainty caused by the Russia-Ukraine war. This action research adds nuance and layers of complexity to current understandings of the pedagogical model of VE by offering a rare insight into the evolving perspectives of faculty members as they critically examined their responses to the unforeseen challenges posed by rapidly changing circumstances of teaching in times of war and reflected on their interactions with colleagues in seeking collaborative solutions. We hope that this account of the affordances and challenges encountered in the project will contribute to the evidence-based understanding of VEs affected by geopolitical instability and inform the cognizant planning and implementation of future collaborations.

Context

Participating institutions in both the U.S. and Ukraine recognized the affordances of VE as a generative space for authentic global learning that challenges and reimagines outdated, transactional models of intercultural communication. The Ukrainian partners felt deep urgency as the compounded impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 halted all forms of educational physical mobility for students and faculty alike and all education remained exclusively online (HRW, 2023). The participating Ukrainian professors of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) accessed our learning platform for the VE (a shared Google Classroom) either from their homes or, during blackouts caused by enemy attacks on infrastructure, from the university where they all worked. In this context, VE emerged not merely as an instructional alternative, but as a vital pathway for sustaining international collaboration and pedagogical engagement while embroiled in crisis.

From the U.S. side, participating faculty approached VE through a lens of educational equity, foregrounding its potential to disrupt the gatekeeping functions of traditional study-abroad programs. For students in the participating programs (i.e., Literacy and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)), many of whom identify as members of racially, linguistically, and socio-economically marginalized communities, VE offered a rare and meaningful opportunity

to engage in global education without the financial or logistical barriers that often constrain physical mobility (Whatley et al., 2022). In this way, VE expanded the boundaries of their learning spaces and rendered intercultural experiences more equitably accessible.

However, institutional policies of the American university's global learning program sponsoring the VE required that major project activities and their corresponding assessments receive approval prior to engaging in project collaboration with international partners. Hence, inequality of participation was built into the design of the VE through institutional authority, creating a power imbalance manifested in curricular inequity (Luke & Woods, 2010). This initial and unintended tension between the principles of global collaboration and the pressure placed on faculty to adhere to institutional norms, as well as on the institution itself to comply with accountability structures shaped by Western assessment practices, prompted faculty in this VE to engage in ongoing critical evaluation of the collaboration and to work toward the enactment of critical praxis (Saeed & Paulson, 2023) from the onset of the project.

The Exchange

Our courses brought together elements of critical digital literacies (Literacy) with culturally responsive pedagogies (TESOL and TEFL). The aim of this collaboration was to foster a critically engaged, cross-cultural learning environment in which students from diverse backgrounds could interrogate multimodal texts through the lenses of power, politics, and culture. Organized in inter-institutional, inter-disciplinary groups, students engaged in asynchronous discussions that explored how modes and meanings shift across cultural contexts. These conversations underscored the importance of interpretive flexibility and the role of culture in shaping meaning making. However, as all language-based communication was conducted in English, U.S. instructors and students were positioned in a place of linguistic dominance, inadvertently reproducing existing epistemic inequities in VEs (O'Dowd, 2025).

The students worked on five modules across seven weeks (see Table 1 for student information). Using Google Classroom as their shared platform, students collaborated on multimodal compositions for each course module. They employed digital tools such as Flip for video introductions (Module 1), MyStorybook.com/StoryJumper for creating multimodal picture books (Module 2), Canva for critical infographics comparing cultural meanings of modes (Module 3), and Google Slides for critical voice-over presentations on their cultural interpretations of multimodal videos (Module 4). These projects invited students to synthesize central concepts from the course, particularly those related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, through definitions and applications grounded in their lived experiences. The VE culminated in individually composed reinventions of multimodal texts, an essential practice in the development of criticality (Module 5) (Mirra et al., 2018). This assignment emphasized critical self-reflection, intercultural awareness, and the transformative power of multimodal design.

Table 1: *Student Participants by Course*

Course	Level	N
U.S. Literacy	Graduate	9
U.S. TESOL	Graduate	8
Ukrainian TEFL	Graduate/Undergraduate	25

Note. N=42

The project was anchored in a commitment to criticality as essential to intercultural competence development. Faculty facilitated the VE experience through a Freirean critical lens, centering dialogic engagement, reflection on power dynamics, and mutual meaning making (Freire, 1970). Grounded in the principles of critical pedagogy, student interactions with course content and with international peers were potential opportunities for transformative learning. By embracing the tenets of critical digital pedagogy, this project serves as a model for educators seeking to design VE experiences that not only transverse international borders, but can also cultivate deeper understandings of power, identity, and global solidarity (Dietrich, 2022). These conditions shaped who could participate, how, and under what terms, making equity less about access and more about whose norms governed the collaboration.

Theoretical Framework

We structured our approach to examine teacher perspectives on designing, implementing, and reflecting on the VE project within the framework of critical theory (Freire, 1970; Stewart et al., 2026). Critical theory seeks to reveal and critique the power structures and cultural assumptions that contribute to the oppression of marginalized groups (Kincheloe et al., 2011). It emphasizes four core principles relevant to critical pedagogies: challenging the status quo, examining diverse viewpoints, addressing sociopolitical issues in education, and taking action to promote social justice (Lewison et al., 2002). This study reflects on the collaborative experiences of international educators aiming to challenge the reproduction of teaching and learning practices that favor cultural and linguistic dominance, economic privilege, and an isolationist, equilibristic view of global realities (Ganassin et al., 2021).

Recognizing that disrupting oppressive dichotomies begins with an understanding of the true nature of power distribution in social systems, including education, Freire (1970) argued that reflection is a vital step toward transformative action (p. 38). Our methodology encouraged the participating faculty to reflect on their interactions throughout the project (with international colleagues and students), as they navigated the complexities of applying VE pedagogy in the context of an ongoing war. Additionally, we aimed to highlight critical perspectives on the inequities that hinder more inclusive access to intercultural learning experiences through VE, particularly for international educational communities living under duress, in crisis, or within adversarial political contexts, as well as explore potential solutions to enhance the equitable engagement of all participating faculty and students in the project.

We define power as (a) institutional (procedures, approval/funding, grading practices), (b) epistemic (whose knowledge, histories, and cultural frameworks privilege the structuring of global learning), and (c) discursive (norms of participation, professionalism, and "success") (Foucault, 1980; Kincheloe et al., 2011; Luke & Woods, 2009). We use praxis to name the reflexive movement between critique and action as instructors negotiated these conditions in real time and after the VE's conclusion (Freire, 1970).

Purpose and Research Questions

In this study, we aimed to explore the participating instructors' perspectives on conceptualizing, planning, and implementing the VE project with respect to socio-cultural, political, and educational realities of each participating university (Ganassin, 2021) through their own practice

(Gibbs et al., 2017; Hien, 2009) against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war. We were particularly interested in understanding how the instructors navigated the critical intercultural spaces inherent in any VE but intensified by the gravity of the geopolitical context in this project, in relation to their cultural and national backgrounds. To do so, we analyzed the following research questions with participating Ukrainian and American instructors:

1. How did international faculty perceive the ways in which the VE constrained or enabled equitable critical learning within the current geopolitical context?
2. How did the international faculty enact critical praxis in response to institutional, cultural, and geopolitical constraints?

Methods

The VE project was a collaborative effort involving three faculty members from the School of Education at a large private university in the Northeast region of the U.S. and three faculty members from the Department of Philology at a large state university in Eastern Ukraine. This action research study (Gibbs et al., 2017; Hien, 2009) focuses specifically on the instructors' perspectives regarding their experiences in the project and is part of a larger research initiative. Table 2 presents the background characteristics of the American and Ukrainian faculty members and outlines their roles in the project in relation to this inquiry.

Table 2: *Ukrainian and American Faculty*

Characteristic	Initials					
	EM	OS	JG	NS	OK	AK
Country	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	Ukraine	Ukraine	Ukraine
Higher Education Teaching (yrs)	14	8	3	18	3.5	5
Prior Experience Teaching in Global Learning Projects	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Number of Courses in Criticality Previously Taught	> 5	>5	> 5	0	0	0
Role(s) During the Project	Project Coordinator	Instructor	Instructor	Instructor Project Coordinator	Instructor	Facilitator

Note. Faculty demographics and teaching information are reported as they were at the time of the project (Spring 2024).

Data Collection and Analysis

In keeping with our action research methodology, the project coordinators, NS-UKR and EM-U.S., collected reflective surveys from the instructors (NS, OK, OS, JG) at the conclusion of each of the first four instructional modules (see Table 3 for the data collection timeline). The reflective surveys included three open-ended questions, encouraging instructors to highlight successes, identify areas for improvement, and propose modifications for future module implementations. The results of the surveys were discussed by the project coordinators during weekly coordinator debrief meetings using the following grounding questions:

1. What are the challenges, successes, and emerging promising practices noted by the instructors?
2. What do we see as persistent themes within teacher responses?

The project coordinators took detailed notes during each of the four discussions for subsequent analysis.

After completing the final module of the project, the two professors who participated in project design but did not teach, AK-UKR and EM-U.S., held a virtual, recorded focus group meeting with the teaching professors, lasting approximately 1 hour. The goal of the meeting was to gather their perspectives on the completed VE project through questions the instructors had not yet considered, a unique element not often afforded in action research. The focus group was organized around a series of guiding questions, but it also allowed additional comments and discussions as they arose. After collaborating closely over several weeks, we hoped that the final interview would encourage open, honest, and reflective responses, giving insight into the instructors' genuine perspectives. During the meeting, instructors reflected on the lessons they learned from their first experience with VE collaboration. They also discussed recommendations for future iterations of this project, as well as for designers of other VE experiences in similar socio-cultural and geopolitical contexts.

Table 3: *Data Collection Timeline*

Module number	Week(s)	Topic	Instruments
1	1	Introduction to diversity, equity, and inclusion	Reflective survey Notes from coordinator debrief sessions Demographics survey
2	2	Multimodality	Reflective survey Notes from coordinator debrief sessions
3	3	Criticality	Reflective survey Notes from coordinator debrief sessions
4	4	Critical analysis	Reflective survey Notes from coordinator debrief sessions
5	5-7	Critical reinvention	Focus group interview

After transcribing and cleaning the interview, authors one and two, EM and OS, analyzed the focus group interview, survey responses, and notes from coordinator debrief sessions using axial coding (Saldaña, 2021) aligned with our research questions (Table 4). Drawing on findings from literature regarding VE projects conducted in countries affected by open military conflicts and other forms of duress (e.g., Bovill, 2020; Dietrich, 2022), we examined teacher perceptions of evolving communication patterns among international peers, as well as breakdowns in communication, including connectivity issues stemming from the harsh realities of ongoing war (RQ1). In addition to coding for outcomes and challenges, we coded for where institutional and cultural norms produced inequitable participation conditions (e.g., approval timelines, grading structures, assumptions about deadlines/voice) and for praxis responses (e.g., co-decision-making, timeline redesign, inclusion clauses, humanizing moves) (RQ2).

Through several iterative rounds of coding, we further refined these codes to understand how the intercultural, cross-institutional, and geopolitical context of the collaboration in this VE shaped or transformed critical pedagogical practices that faculty found (a) *effective,* (b) those they deemed *ineffective*, and (c) the criteria they identified as *essential* building blocks for future iterations of the project.

Table 4: *Axial Codes*

Axial Code	Further Description
Student Success	in collaborative critical digital practices
Student Challenges	in navigating shifting structures
Student Growth	in recognizing power and inequity
Teacher Challenges	in resisting standardization
Teacher Growth	in interrogating positionality
Geopolitical Impact	on critical learning
Praxis	disrupt inequity, mitigate inequity

Positionality

As action researchers, it is important to position ourselves within the study. Both researchers are white, cisgender tenure-track researchers at the university who had both served in leadership positions for the graduate program. At the time of the study, Author One was in her third year of teaching in the PhD in Literacy program, having previously taught and supervised literacy experiences for diverse learners at another institution. Although she had twenty years of experience working with multilingual students and faculty, she had not yet had an opportunity to participate in any VE projects. The experience challenged her to apply her intercultural competencies to the context of VE methodologies and expand her understanding of equity and inclusiveness in online teaching through a global perspective. As a VE project coordinator, she was particularly cognizant of her responsibility to ensure the academic integrity of the study. She worked to maintain an accurate representation of the U.S. colleagues' voices through ongoing communication, participant validation, and careful documentation of weekly project developments. For transparency, she shared coordinator meeting notes with all participants immediately following each meeting and stored all project data in a shared folder.

Though Author Two had been teaching at the university for seven years and was familiar with many of the students, this was her first time as their instructor. Her research was centered in

critical digital literacies, so she had a vested interest in ensuring that this VE was successful in both creating a meaningful context for student learning and supporting her own scholarship. At the same time, this positionality required ongoing reflexivity regarding how her authority as a course instructor and researcher intersected with students' experiences of uncertainty and uneven participation. She was particularly attentive not only to how students' multimodal compositions reflected global, critical, and culturally grounded interpretations across contexts, but also to how global inequities, access, and geopolitical realities shaped what students were able to create.

Collectively, we acknowledge that the findings reflect our interpretations of a study that did not go as smoothly or equitably as we had hoped and intended due in part to the geopolitical realities of the war and because of the institutional structures that upheld the Western pedagogical norms for ourselves and our students. Reflecting on these tensions is essential to our critical stance and influences the ways in which we interpret and present the data and findings.

Findings

The findings discussed below reflect instructors' diverse perspectives on project implementation and their recommendations on enhancing equitable outcomes for all participants in future iterations of the project. In line with critical theory's emphasis on self-reflexivity and transformation (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe et al., 2011), the project held a mirror to the teaching practices, prompting them to interrogate their own positionalities, the power dynamics embedded within their teaching, and the needs of their students (Hien, 2009). We present findings as both systems of power that shaped the exchange and praxis that informed how instructors mitigated inequity, which can illuminate how Western norms clashed with international ideologies.

Praxis Under Constraint: Co-Creation and Authority

Instructors' responses indicated that exploring the intercultural awareness and intercultural competence inherent in VE encourages critical evaluation and reinvention of pedagogical practices (Dooly, 2016) through reflections on their own teaching practices and the institutional and cultural norms that influence them. When asked about what they determined as success in implementing the project, the Ukrainian and American faculty described notable shifts in their perspectives on teaching through the intercultural collaboration. N.S.-UKR shared that although she had previously participated in two professional development programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, collaboration in the VE became a "huge step" in her professional development, and she considered it a "brilliant example of asynchronous teaching."

Despite the uneven authority and curricular control in the VE where contribution of the Ukrainian faculty to the design was minimal, NS found the experience to be transformative, creating space for her to reflect on her pedagogy and expertise. Even though she did not feel that she equally participated in the instructional process as a co-creator of content, the collaboration pushed NS to critically evaluate the role of the teacher in online instruction, as she interacted with a pedagogical model that positioned the teacher as an active participant in student learning and a facilitator of student engagement:

> As a participant, I looked from the teacher's side how you filled this course, how you structured it. And the way you are involving students with the help of your comments and your

> very quick responses to some questions. It's just something amazing! It just requires a lot of reaction from the teacher.

NS's professional growth did not come from seamless implementation, but rather from navigating asymmetry, constraint, and difference. NS noted that collaborative models of engagement implemented in the VE may have constrained equal participation of representatives of the Ukrainian educational system, despite presenting many advantages. She posited that Ukrainian students' and instructors' difficulties with participation (including working in groups, responding to a large amount of content on a weekly basis) should be considered in a broader context of cultural transformations within the Ukrainian system of education (Kremen & Liashenko, 2020), particularly the tensions between traditional transmission-oriented instructional approaches toward Western epistemologies that emphasize critical engagement:

> Every time I open the [Google] Classroom, I think that maybe we should teach our students this way because we also have distance students. But they just have this task, they do this, these different assignments, individually. And I think it's a little bit overwhelming because, you know, it seems like too much because our courses' structure is much simpler…We've just been developing their critical thinking, their involvement, their independence. There are some changes happening with our integration into European education. A lot of things are going on and /as a teacher/ it takes me a lot of time to process this development.

As a reflective practitioner, NS negotiated her understanding of which pedagogical practices might best inform her teaching amidst cultural and institutional differences between the two educational systems and changes currently unfolding in Ukrainian higher education. This process reflected an engagement with critical praxis, as ongoing reflection on these conditions prompted her questioning of traditional online practices and the role of the teacher within the evolving geological context. The VE pushed the instructors to negotiate conceptual frameworks across TESOL/TEFL and literacy disciplines, reinforcing the co-construction of knowledge within the collaborative space. Rather than focusing on individual expertise, the project positioned teaching as dialogic and fluid:

> It made me grow as a professor in many different ways. It pushed me, because…this was the first time I taught a course collaboratively with other professors...There was a lot of collaboration, negotiation, and recreation. I think it ended up being even better than what we would typically find in a course. I think that was a huge success in approaching teaching as a collaborative process and a huge success for me with this experience (JG-U.S.).

The instructors explained that they needed student feedback to adjust schedules and assessment practices in response to rapidly changing circumstances, including the power outages and internet loss caused by Russian bombings. OS-U.S. noted, "For me, it was very much a learning experience to do a lot more pivoting and being a lot more flexible. And the students had to be a lot more flexible with me. It was a lot of polling."

Involving students in the decision-making process during these challenging times allowed for co-creation in learning and teaching, aligning with the principles of critical pedagogy (Bovill, 2020). The same instructor remarked:

> It forced me to practice what I preach. I practice critical theory, right? And, a part of that is co-constructed learning that is very much an environment in which the students have equal say and part of that is working with students throughout the course, they have equal say in things. ...I periodically ask for feedback and for the most part it is like 'no, we like this, keep going' and so with this there is a lot of feedback and pivot. Because we were changing as we went. That for me was a learning experience.

The geopolitical challenges of the VE illuminated elements of OS's praxis, foregrounding flexibility, relational trust, and shared decision-making juxtaposed against traditional hierarchical academic structures. Critically, this shift did not simply reflect pedagogical flexibility; it represented a partial redistribution of authority in which instructors relinquished control over timelines, assessment expectations, and decision-making, which challenged the hierarchical norms that typically govern Western higher education classrooms (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Luke et al., 2011; Stewart et al., 2021).

When faculty reflected on effective practices identified during the project, the importance of collaboration as a tool for improving pedagogy was essential. OS-U.S. shared her experience of enhancing assessment practices through her partnership with EM-U.S., where they collaborated to create a rubric for the capstone assignment in the project:

> We honed in on some of the assignment wording and rubrics back and forth, and we really tweaked and went in deep on the wording and really thinking about the very nitty gritty of what we were saying…that was very helpful to really sort of iteratively go over those and have other eyes on [it].

This process underscores how assessment can function as an epistemic gatekeeping tool unless it is intentionally reimagined through critical collaboration. In line with our Freirean framing of critical literacies, the instructors used assessment not to test memorized information but to carefully guide students in analyzing, critiquing, and reimagining ideas (Kahl, 2013). By highlighting co-creation and iterative decision-making, they enacted praxis that challenged the assumption that expertise and curricular authority are held singularly with themselves or the institution, positioning teaching as a negotiated, co-constructed practice rather than a top-down one.

JG-U.S. added that weekly reflective surveys used to inform coordinators' discussions and later shared as a summative report with all participants, fostered deeper engagement with critical pedagogical practices:

> I try to think of myself as a reflective practitioner and think about what was done, what students are saying, and to readjust. But having the same date and time to force me to articulate it made me even more reflective by actually having to write it out.

Through this effort to instill a culture of shared reflexivity, instructors gradually cultivated openness within the group, creating the conditions necessary for productive collaborative action (Cherniavska et al., 2024). With each module, faculty shared more candidly about the challenges they and their students encountered in a learning environment shaped by an ongoing geopolitical crisis. These reflections prompted critical interrogation of pedagogical approaches through faculty discussions and informed the co-creation of practices responsive to the unfolding circumstances of the project.

The Ukrainian faculty recognized that the level of collaboration expected of project participants and students was significantly higher than what is typically expected in Ukrainian academic culture. Despite this, they consistently acknowledged that the collaborative model provided a valuable learning experience for them and their students. As OK-UKR stated, the collaboration was particularly effective in fostering an understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) among Ukrainian students. During a team meeting, AK-UKR explained that interacting with American students during DEI activities was impactful because the concept of DEI is not commonly addressed in academic and educational discussions in Ukraine. For the students, it was a new and powerful experience. In a critical evaluation of the project outcomes, NS-UKR also highlighted the value of collaboration in enhancing critical learning experiences for students in her courses. Initially, she discussed the students' struggle with group work, even noting that "They were relieved to hear that the last module was an individual task." Nevertheless, NS concurred that participating Ukrainian students benefited from collaborative engagement in DEI content:

> ...the content was just perfect, and it really intrigued them and gave them a lot of insight into this culture and the importance of cultural diversity, you know, equity, and that was something amazing. But, you know, despite all those challenges, I think that they are very happy with their participation in this project.

NS then turned to her own teaching:

> Collaboration is something that we have to develop and, personally, I have to develop when the project is not just, you know, something that they have this presentation in one class for ten minutes. …Maybe introduce the project, especially when there are a lot of students…it would be a good idea to make at least one meeting with our students because if they had this opportunity to collaborate, maybe to speak with each other, it would probably make this project more successful.

Rather than reflecting a deficit in students' collaboration, this tension highlights how VE projects often privilege Western pedagogical norms (e.g., collaborative knowledge creation) without fully accounting for differing academic cultures or the additional cognitive/emotional burdens imposed by crisis contexts.

OS-U.S. concurred that participating Ukrainian students benefited from the opportunity to engage in collaborative analysis and co-creation of texts with their American peers, noting: "There are a lot of variables here with Internet connection and time zones and things, but for those who were able to make it work, it seems like it was a really valuable collaboration for a lot of them." She shared that U.S. and Ukrainian students' reflections indicated that collaborative engagement in critical literacy assignments facilitated the development of critical reflexivity:

> They said that they did really learn a lot from their groupmates, and that they learned a lot about themselves as well in learning about how they interpret things. And then about what their culture means and thinking about who they are as well. I think it's very valuable for them to kind of take a look inward, and that's also part of criticality.

Overall, faculty from both countries emphasized that the project pushed them to grow professionally through collaboration across disciplines, developing new assessment practices, and negotiating the challenges of student engagement in collaborative work. They also underscored how the war shaped their teaching and learning. The loss of pivotal infrastructure and ongoing disruptions compelled instructors to practice criticality in flexibly adjusting their courses, foregrounding student voice in decision-making, and embracing co-construction of the course. The collaborative and reflective nature of the critical pedagogy under duress enabled forms of critical praxis through which instructors and students challenged traditional hierarchies of knowledge production and pedagogical authority. For Ukrainian faculty and students especially, the exchange created space for critical engagement, offering new opportunities for international collaboration during a time when physical academic mobility and access to global discourse were profoundly constrained.

Institutional Power: Curricular Norms and Inclusion

Faculty reflections revealed that power imbalances within the VE were structurally produced through institutional requirements of curriculum approval, funding, and technological support. Through this requirement, institutional hierarchies steered the curriculum in ways that privileged the American perspective, creating tension with the notion of curriculum internationalization as a process of co-creation grounded in negotiation, empathy, and the willingness of all VE collaborators to embrace ambiguity (Dhar & Chakraborty, 2025). As a result, the U.S.-based faculty directed most of the decisions within the VE, reinforcing Western epistemic dominance despite the project's critical intentions. However, instructors acknowledged this structure, as discussions around project challenges focused on the uneven contributions of participants and the need for greater inclusion. The instructors recognized that equal representation of Ukrainian culture was essential to create a space conducive to meaningful engagement and critical analysis among international peers. During the focus interview, the American instructors emphasized the importance of practicing inclusiveness in curriculum design for future collaborations, as expressed by OS-U.S.:

> I would love for our colleagues to be more involved. I think that it would be a much more successful collaboration if we had more input from you all and that we had more of your ideas in it as well.

The instructors' mutual recognition of unequal participation and the imbalance from the onset echoes others' assertions that power operates through institutional structures that privilege certain forms of knowledge (Foucault; 1980; Luke & Woods, 2009). Because the U.S. faculty had to submit the curriculum for approval before Ukrainian colleagues' input, we inadvertently reinforced Western academic ideals and epistemologies, which is a persistent feature of global educational hierarchies (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Luke & Woods, 2009).

Additionally, the realities of the ongoing full-scale war also shaped the collaboration, highlighting the importance of adaptability and strategic thinking, especially following the significant attack on Ukrainian infrastructure two months into the project. In weekly reflection surveys, the American instructors shared their strategies for enhancing the global awareness of their students, as they addressed challenges such as internet connectivity issues, lack of participation from groupmates, and overall uncertainty about the project's future:

> Another challenge that surfaced is the Internet connectivity students are experiencing, particularly those within occupied territories, and their efforts to join in once they gained access. When this was shared with our students, who indicated a lack of response from some of their peers, they were shocked and expressed appreciation for the resilience of their Ukrainian peers. They also felt relieved to know that they would not incur lateness penalties. (JG-U.S.)

The instructors recognized significant opportunities for more equitable decision-making between Ukrainian and American instructors. This collaboration could mitigate some of the identified student equity issues, particularly those related to technology and communication challenges, ultimately enhancing the success of future iterations (Coordinator Debriefing, Module 4). To support student participation, instructors suggested making the project a graded assignment (which it was not for the Ukrainian students), echoing O'Dowd's (2018) principles for the design and implementation of VE projects. They emphasized the importance of engaging in collaborative planning to account for the impact of the war, which includes providing more flexibility in the timeline, such as presenting content in two-week modules. Additionally, the instructors proposed collaborating on ongoing adjustments in response to student feedback and continuously refining the content to foster inclusive internationalization, particularly for Ukrainian students: "It was very, very different for them, just different culture, different modes of interactions, and this collaborative approach" (NS-UKR).

Recognizing the unequal power distribution within the project, the faculty sought to address these inequities through immediate intervention. During one meeting, Ukrainian and American faculty members developed a plan to create a more inclusive learning environment for Ukrainian students who use the Cyrillic alphabet for identification. After a cross-cultural discussion about the cultural sensitivity surrounding the distinction between translating and transliterating Slavic names by English speakers (qizi Sodiqova, 2024), they agreed that future iterations of the project should include a clause in the social contract requiring Ukrainian students' names to appear in both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabet, as they do in Ukrainian passports (Group Meeting Notes, Module 3). This seemingly minor design decision functioned as an act of epistemic justice, affirming the legitimacy of Ukrainian linguistic identity within a space otherwise structured by English-dominant norms.

Geopolitical Crisis: Time, Productivity, and "Success" as Western Norms

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war significantly impacted the instructors' perspectives on global education, prompting critical reflection on their pedagogy. Disruptions to the VE exposed how expectations of participation, timeliness, and productivity are culturally and structurally situated within Western academic norms that often presume safety and stability. The instructors emphasized the need to ensure consistent instructor guidance to account for unexpected disruptions in the complex geopolitical reality and students' culturally situated responses. Differences in approaches to deadlines and group participation arose as a central challenge in the study and data, prompting an emergency meeting after Module 3 and informing subsequent planning. Although these challenges with participation were evident from the start of the project, they worsened following severe attacks on the electric grid, which reduced Ukrainian students' participation, disrupted group work, and led to missed deadlines, as one instructor noted on the reflective surveys:

> This week, students have emailed me and reported to me during my office hours that they either have not heard from their Ukrainian group members, or in one case, the Ukrainian student indicated to the U.S. students that they have many papers and assignments and won't be able to engage in the group work anymore. Students are working on the projects; however, without the input from their Ukrainian peers for the group project, the cross-cultural perspectives have been negatively impacted (JG-U.S.).

The Ukrainian colleagues shared that one the major challenges of the project was the stress of the war, combined with emergency school policies that prevented instructors from penalizing late submissions, which led to some students becoming indifferent to Western academic policies such as strict deadlines. During the group meeting following Module 3, the faculty also added that Ukrainian students often have a cultural tendency toward individual work, which can result in a reluctance to ask for help. This cultural aspect was offered as an explanation for the lack of participation observed among some students. Recognizing this issue, the Ukrainian faculty acknowledged that a greater presence from instructors in asynchronous projects may be necessary to encourage students to engage, ask questions, and make adequate progress toward achieving project goals: "I think I should pay more attention to my students' needs. I need to ask them to communicate more about their problems and challenges. Students have to know that their teacher is always ready to help them" (OK-UKR).

American instructors regularly expressed concern that their students were culturally attuned to the pressure of deadlines and therefore experienced stress and frustration when they struggled to adhere to group work guidelines and submit assignments by the specified deadlines: "Some students are struggling to get in contact with their partners and cannot complete the Modules" (OS-U.S., reflective survey). Because the VE was originally designed around Western educational practices, they were continually being upheld and reinforced by the students, despite numerous attempts to collectively reframe the instructional discourse within the developing context. Rather than viewing missed deadlines or access to group participation as failures of the students, it became evident that these were issues of broader inequities across global learning.

Differences in student engagement with participation and deadlines prompted instructors to rethink how to support students and sustain the project. The American faculty primarily emphasized the need for flexibility in deadlines (e.g., "I am thinking I am going to give students an extra week to complete all of the work as well") and grouping (e.g., "In the future, we may want to organize the groups more effectively)." Despite the global conditions, the Ukrainian instructors continuously reminded their students of the importance of participation and collaboration with their international peers. They were also particularly focused on finding better ways to motivate their students to persevere throughout the project: "It was a very difficult experience for me as I had to…motivate my learners who are not motivated because of the war" (OK-UKR), echoed by NS-UKR:

> The most challenging for me was to motivate the students to just, you know, to motivate them to participate, to communicate. We are very stressed, and all those tasks seemed very difficult for them because, you know, like 500 words or some kind of those projects, and they had some difficulties motivating themselves with all those. So, maybe the difficulty was to explain to them that it is their part of the task. And maybe the difficulty was to motivate them to engage in conversation and discussion, like your students do.

These tensions reveal how deadlines and policies, which are often treated as neutral requirements in courses, can be exclusive when structural inequities and lived realities are not considered (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020).

The American instructors shared the challenges of coping with uncertainty in teaching, particularly their struggle to adapt to the reduced control they had over the educational process. OS expressed: "Things are not going their way. That was hard for me, waiting on other people, and things aren't happening quickly. To know my students need something - that's hard for me." Engaging in praxis in the volatile global context, OS highlights the tension between authority and shared agency (Freire, 1970) in attempting to support her students. Despite coping with the unplanned and bracing for the unexpected, having their ability to respond swiftly to unexpected disruptions in the learning process repeatedly tested, all faculty involved in the project recognized that the VE was a transformative cultural experience that contributed significantly to their professional growth:

> This has been a very unique experience for me. And it's been amazing. Just like a roller coaster: there are some highs and lows. But it's been exhilarating throughout, and I look forward to the opportunity to be able to do something like this again (JG-U.S.).

OS-U.S. added that engaging with the ambiguity and embracing the discomfort of teaching in a global virtual setting where familiar instructional strategies could not always be applied, also positioned the lived experience of practicing criticality in crisis as instrumental to pedagogical growth:

> When we're in a face-to-face class, we have those times when we can regroup and come together and say, okay, this isn't really working. But in this case, you know, it was polling and maybe things took a little bit longer, and there were maybe more frustrations. And so that was that was very much something that I needed to learn. But I think that I also view that as a triumph because it was an opportunity for me to... practice what I preach.

Through praxis and critical reflection, the instructors collectively embarked on a pathway to deepen their understanding of how instability and inequity in VEs and education writ large can unearth power structures as well as opportunities for collaboration. Across the Findings, faculty praxis was both a response to and a critique of long-established power structures, illustrating that equity (in global learning) requires iterative critical questioning and redesign of the norms that dictate participation, assessment, and authority.

Discussion

This action research study contributes to the understanding of VE practices in higher education by offering a critical perspective on various dimensions of an intercultural collaboration impacted by the physical and affective effects of the unfolding military conflict. Criticality, which was envisioned at the inception of the project as a structured academic experience to enhance the students' meaning making and meaning creation processes in literacy contexts (Hauck, 2019), under the pressures of war, expanded to become a primary tool for deepening instructors' understanding of the role of reflective teaching and collaborative decision-making in fostering equity and inclusion in unstable educational environments (Larrivee, 2000; Lenkaitis, 2020; Stewart et

al., 2026). Our study suggests that VEs can reproduce the hierarchies they intend to disrupt when global collaboration is operationalized through Western institutional norms and where curricular legitimacy, assessment, and timelines are pre-set through said norms. In crisis contexts, these logics become more visible, as instability strengthens the divide between planning and what can realistically be enacted under conditions where responsive pedagogy is pushed to its limits by instructors and by students' need to accommodate continuous disruptions.

As the war shadowed discussions and negotiations among faculty and students, it continuously disrupted the assumptions and pedagogical expectations of the American faculty and students. A critical re-evaluation of beliefs that lead to the generalization of instructional practices developed in the safety of Western learning environments (Dietrich, 2022) may enable openness to flexible, adaptive strategies and quick decision-making in response to disruptions in the learning process caused by crises and the impact of stress on the emotional state of participants on both sides of the exchange. Given the limited number of VE studies addressing the unique considerations of planning and implementing intercultural collaborative projects amid conflict, political unrest, or economic instability, there is a pressing need for more critical inquiry that interrogates normative assumptions about learning and planning. Such research should center the perspectives of VE participants who are accustomed to operating within structured, long-term educational systems yet must still navigate uncertainty, disruption, and shifting geopolitical conditions that challenge traditional models of international collaboration.

Active collaboration with the partner institution was instrumental in challenging preconceived assumptions about teaching and learning (O'Dowd, 2015). Weekly reflections and virtual meetings enabled instructors to address student concerns in real time while making culturally embedded expectations visible and open to negotiation. These practices supported more equitable participation and helped sustain the collaboration under challenging conditions. Future practitioner-oriented publications based on in-depth experiences in challenging VE contexts could contribute more instructional strategies and tools to guide flexible planning and identify collaborative approaches, including those that center student involvement in response to expected and unforeseen disruptions in the learning process.

A research-informed understanding of humanizing pedagogies may be necessary to counteract the stress, lack of motivation, and disengagement encountered in this project. By centering participants' lived experiences and emotional realities (Midgette & Stewart, 2026), humanizing approaches offer a framework for responding to the affective dimensions of learning under duress. According to instructors' reflections, as the geopolitical situation worsened, instructors increasingly prioritized care and support, indicating that, intuitively, the participants made humanity a priority over academics. A VE implemented in a learning community experiencing sustained stress may become more effective through the integration of intentional humanizing strategies that foster empathy, presence, and belonging, and both student and faculty agency despite adverse circumstances.

A paucity of critical VE projects in countries experiencing acute instability (Nicolaou et al., 2025) highlights persistent issues of equity and inclusion in Western higher education (Freire, 2004; hooks, 1994; Nussbaum, 2006). Avoiding participation in programs abroad that provide VE as the only option for accessing global learning, because such collaborations require more effort and may not align with the Western definition of "success," misses opportunities to foster inclusion and equity in international learning communities. Sheltering from such experiences ultimately fails students who may be accustomed to living in safety, as it leads to a distorted vision of international realities. Our findings on instructors' professional growth reported in this manuscript support the

educational value of novelty and discomfort and invite new research on establishing partnerships that empower all participants by reframing international collaborations as supportive and liberating experiences.

Limitations

We recognize that much of the data is self-reported and self-analyzed and therefore contains bias. However, as many assert (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2017; Hien, 2009), systematically researching one's own teaching practices offers valuable insights for both students and teachers.
Importantly, we recognize the power dynamics at play between the instructors of the courses and in their candor of reflection. During the reflective focus group and entire VE, the American faculty participated with greater institutional authority and safety. Inviting participants who were experiencing crisis and who held less authority within the VE to reflect on challenges and perceived shortcomings of the project may have constrained the extent to which all participants felt able or willing to express critique openly. NS-UKR added a cultural nuance to this point, suggesting that Ukrainian participants may have been more restrained in voicing criticism compared to American colleagues due to lingering cultural legacies of suppressed critical discourse during the Soviet period. Although data was documented with the mutual agreement of both coordinators, EM-U.S., in her role as a project coordinator, may have inadvertently dominated aspects of the data analysis during coordinator meetings, as NS-UKR was less vocal in those discussions. Given the sensitivity of power positioning within the war-affected context of the collaboration, it is important to acknowledge that EM may not have sufficiently decentered the weekly agendas from a focus on problem-solving (i.e., pointing out "what went wrong" according to American expectations) toward a deeper interrogation of how geopolitical disruptions, cultural contexts, and power systems shaped participation. Such positioning may have been interpreted by NS as negotiating toward standards shaped by Western expectations for the design and implementation of VE. Finally, our reporting of the data is shaped by our positionalities as U.S.-based faculty and co-authors. Though we had hoped to include our Ukrainian colleagues in the writing of this manuscript, their availability due to the war did not allow them to participate. As a result, the manuscript presents the interpretations of two American participants.

Implications

This study unearths an important issue regarding power dynamics in education, which is the clash between pedagogy and the reproduction of oppressive assessment models. Our findings suggest that timelines, evaluation, and institutional accountability structures shaped both student stress and faculty decision-making, particularly on the U.S. side of the exchange. VE projects are often considered successful only when they conform to the rigid framework of the American education system, which is fundamentally inequitable for the other countries involved. What are the true limits of internationalization afforded by higher education in the U.S. within the constraints of this hierarchical, inflexible system, if tested by global realities, such as in the case of our project? We argue that future VEs must examine these structures to make fundamental changes to their designs and assessments to be more culturally inclusive, thus encouraging more educators to participate in VE projects that represent global reality without reservations rooted in oppression.

A democratic society is dependent on citizens' preparedness to interrogate systems and actions through the lens of equity. By recognizing and challenging inequities within educational

systems through reflexivity and co-responsibility (Saeed & Paulson, 2024), educators and students alike can cultivate the courage to engage with uncertainty and discomfort, challenge the status quo, and create opportunities to dismantle power imbalances in broader societal contexts. When criticality transcends academic spaces, it may empower individuals to question hegemonic narratives, resist propaganda, and understand the mechanisms that sustain epistemic inequality (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Vasquez et al., 2019). Although it is expected that resisting deeply ingrained power imbalances in educational collaborations is a profoundly complex, ongoing endeavor, intentional and relentless engagement in practices for change suggests significant implications for democracy.

References

Bagci, S. C., Guvensoy, I., Turner, R. N., White, F. A., & Piyale, Z. E. (2021). Investigating the role of E-contact and self-disclosure on improving Turkish-Kurdish interethnic relations. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *51*(6), 577-593. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12760

Bloomquist, C. D., Hobson, C. J., Ayaga, J., Trott, C., Suiter, S., & Freeman, A. D. (2022). Facilitated COIL conversational model: A virtual exchange between a private university in the U.S. and a teacher college in South Sudan. *Journal of Virtual Exchange, 5*, 82-93. https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.5.38668

Bovill, C. (2020). Co-creation in learning and teaching: the case for a whole-class approach in higher education. *Higher Education* 79, 1023–1037. https://doi.org/10.1007/ s10734- 019-00453-w

Cherniavska, O., Gryshchenko, I., Hanushchak-Yefimenko, L., Olshanska, O., & Cherniavska, O. (2024). Transformative innovations, virtual exchange, and collaborative leadership: Reshaping higher education for the global digital world Web 4.0. *Management*, *37*, 106–117. https://doi.org/10.30857/2415-3206.2023.1.10

Dhar, B., & Chakraborty, R. (2025). Internationalizing curriculum through virtual exchange: critical perspectives on addressing barriers and advancing DEI in professional learning. *Professional Development in Education*, *51*(3), 451–465. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 1941 5257.2025.2495806

Dietrich, S. E. (2022). Unexpected affordances of virtual exchange as teacher education: Learning about, with, and from students in a conflict country. *Journal of Virtual Exchange, 5*(SI-IVEC2021), 24-41. https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.5.38345

Dooly, M. (2016). 'Please remove your avatar from my personal space': Competences of the telecollaboratively efficient person. In R. O'Dowd & T. Lewis (Eds.), *Online intercultural exchange: Policy, pedagogy, practice* (pp. 192-208). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/ 9781315678931

Foucault, M. (1980). *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews.* Cornell University Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Freire, P. (2004). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Ganassin, S., Satar, M., & Regan, A. (2021). Virtual exchange for internationalization at home in China: Staff perspectives. *Journal of Virtual Exchange, 4(SI-IVEC2020)*, 95-116. https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.4.37934

Gibbs, P., Cartney, P., Wilkinson, K., Parkinson, J., Cunningham, S., James-Reynolds, C., Zoubir, T., Brown, V., Barter, P., Sumner, P., MacDonald, A., Dayananda, A., & Pitt, A. (2017).

Literature review on the use of action research in higher education. *Educational Action Research, 25*(1), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1124046

Hauck, M. (2019). Virtual exchange for (critical) digital literacy skills development. *European Journal of Language Policy, 11*(2), 187–210. https://doi.org/10.3828/ejlp.2019.12

Hien, T. (2009). Why is action research suitable for education? *VNU Journal of Science, Foreign Languages, 25*, 97–106. https://js.vnu.edu.vn/FS/article/view/2240

hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge

Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2023, November 9). *Ukraine: War's Toll on Schools, Children's Future*. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/09/ukraine-wars-toll-schools-childrens-future.

Kahl, D. H. (2013). Critical communication pedagogy and assessment: Reconciling two seemingly incongruous ideas (Pt. 2610-2630). *International Journal of Communication, 7*. https:// ijoc.org/index.php /ijoc/article/view/1897

Kincheloe J. L., McLaren P., & Steinberg S. R. (2011). Critical pedagogy and qualitative research: Moving to the bricolage. In Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 163–178). Sage.

Larrivee, B. (2000). Transforming teacher practice: Becoming the critically reflective teacher. *Reflective Practice, 1*(3), 293e307. https://doi.org/10.1080/713693162

Lenkaitis, C. A. (2020). Teacher candidate reflection: Benefits of using a synchronous computer-mediated communication-based virtual exchange. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *92*, 103041. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103041

Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts, 79*(5), 382-392. https://www.jstor.org/ stable/ 41483258

Luke, A., Iyer, R., & Doherty, C. (2011). Literacy education in the context of globalisation. In Fisher, D. & Lapp, D. (Eds), *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts: Co-Sponsored by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English,* (pp. 104-110). Routledge.

Luke, A., & Woods, A. (2009). Critical literacies in schools: A primer. *Voices from the Middle, 17*(2), 9–18. https://doi.org/10.58680/vm20099457

Mehta, R., & Aguilera, E. (2020). A critical approach to humanizing pedagogies in online teaching and learning. *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology, 37*(3), 109–120. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJILT-10-2019-0099

Midgette, E., & Stewart, O. G. (2025). Designing a critical digital literacies virtual exchange experience to engage and reinvent multimodal texts. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, *8*, 39-53. https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.8.41809

Midgette, E., & Stewart, O. G. (2026). Humanizing online higher education: Equitable outcomes and increased support for traditionally academically marginalized students. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 181*, 105747. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2026.105747

Mirra, N., Morrell, E., & Filipiak, D. (2018). From digital consumption to digital invention: Toward a new critical theory and practice of multiliteracies. *Theory Into Practice, 57*(1), 12–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2017.1390336

Nash, B. L. (2024). Critical inquiry in (and about) media environments: Examining an asset-based digital literacy curriculum. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 1086296X241244700. https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X241244700

Nicolaou, A., Sauro, S., Gudmundsdottir, G. B., & Sundqvist, P. (2025). Critical virtual exchange to address teachers' needs in times of conflict. *Journal of Virtual Exchange, 8*, 54–66. https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.8.42314

Nussbaum, M. (2006). *Frontiers of justice: Disability, nationality, species membership*. Harvard University Press. https://doi-org.jerome.stjohns.edu/10.4159/9780674041578

O'Dowd, R. (2015). The competences of the telecollaborative teacher. *Language Learning Journal, 43*(2), 194-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2013.853374

O'Dowd, R. (2018). Innovations and challenges in using online communication technologies in CLIL. *Theory into Practice*, *57*(3), 232-240. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2018.1484039

O'Dowd, R. (2025). Issues of equity and inclusion in Virtual Exchange. *Language Teaching*, *58*(1), 44–56. https://doi:10.1017/S026144482300040X

Oswal, S. K., Palmer, Z. B., & Koris, R. (2021). Designing virtual team projects with accessibility in mind: An illustrative example of cross-cultural student collaboration. *Journal of Virtual Exchange, 4(SI-IVEC2020)*, 1-27. https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.4.37192

Sodiqova, S. I. (2024, July). Decoding names: approaches to translating anthroponyms across cultures. In *International Conference on World Science and Research* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 43-47). https://worldejurnal.ru/index.php/icwsr/article/view/41

Saeed, T., & Paulson, J. (2023). Values and the possibilities for minimising epistemic injustice in international collaborations: Reflections on bell hooks' Ethics of Love from the Education, Justice and Memory Network (EdJAM). In *Innovations in Peace and* O'Dowd *Education Praxis* (pp. 33-47). Routledge. https://doi-org.10.4324/9781003263111-5

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

Seeber, M., Cattaneo, M., Huisman, J., & Paleari, S. (2016). Why do higher education institutions internationalize? An investigation of the multilevel determinants of internationalization rationales. *Higher Education*, *72*, 685-702. https://www.jstor.org/ stable/26447571

Stewart, O.G., González, J., Midgette, E., & Safonova, N. (2026). Multimodality, Criticality, Culture, and Language: Interdisciplinary Learning in a Cross-Cultural Virtual Exchange for an Expanded Worldview. Tzoumis, K. (Ed.) *Handbook of Using Virtual Exchange Across Disciplines: Building Global Citizens from Home*. https://doi.org/10.1007/ 978-3-032-10711-4_60-1

Stewart, O.G., Hseih, B., Smith, A., & Pandya, J. (2021). What More Can We Do? A Scalar Approach to Examining Critical Digital Literacies in Teacher Education. *Pedagogies: An International Journal (special issue) 16*(2), 125-137. https://doi-org.jerome.stjohns.edu/ 10.1080/1554480X.2021.1914054

Vasquez, V. M., Janks, H., & Comber, B. (2019). Critical literacy as a way of being and doing. *Language Arts, 96*(5), 300–311. https://doi.org/10.58680/la201930093

Whatley, M., LaVenture, S., & Russell, N. (2022). Centering equity in community college virtual international exchange: An exploration of program typology and participant demographics. *Journal of International Students*, *12*(S3), 17-37. https://ojed.org/index. php/jis/article/view/4621

Dr. Ekaterina Midgette is an Associate Professor of Literacy at St. John's University in New York, where she teaches in an online asynchronous doctoral program in literacy. Her research focuses on argumentative writing, culturally responsive literacy instruction for multilingual learners, and equity-centered approaches to online literacy teaching, learning, and assessment.

Dr. Olivia G. Stewart is an Associate Professor of Literacy at St. John's University in the Department of Education Specialties in Queens, NY. Her equity-focused research centers multimodal literacies, critical digital pedagogy, and critical and empowering uses of AI. Dr. Stewart explores how critically integrating multimodal composition through digital tools expands traditional literacy frameworks, particularly for academically marginalized students. Her work demonstrates how these approaches humanize online learning, foster student engagement, and challenge dominant, print-centric academic norms.