

Original Paper

Global Citizenship and Internationalization at Home: Insights from the BRASUIS Virtual Exchange Project

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Abstract

This paper reports on the BRASUIS Virtual Exchange (VE) Project carried out in two universities in Brazil and another one in Switzerland. The theoretical framework informing the research is that of Collaborative Online International Learning COIL/VE as a strategy to develop Global Citizenship (GC) and Internationalization at Home (IaH) in the three institutions involved. The BRASUIS project involved 26 students from the universities involved and eight international scholars as guest speakers. The project included both synchronous and asynchronous exchanges carried out over 14 weeks. The methodology employed to analyze the impact of the BRASUIS project on the institution's IaH and GC approach is qualitative, using content analysis to look at data from reflection reports and observations produced by the project participants and lecturers. Results of the analysis reveal a varying degree of institutionalised internationalisation when comparing Brazilian and Swiss institutions and suggest that the BRASUIS project made a significant contribution to the development of GC and IaH in the Brazilian institutions involved and though it was a teacher-led innovation, there is potential to institutionalize VE projects beyond individual teachers' efforts in those institutions. Results are discussed in terms of the challenges and benefits of VE to develop GC and IaH.

Keywords

Collaborative Online International Learning, Global Citizenship Education, Internationalization of Higher Education, Brazil, Switzerland

1. Introduction

Global Citizenship (GC) has been conceptualized by Unesco (2015) in reference to a sense of belonging to a global community/humanity emphasizing the interconnectedness of local, national and global players and contexts. Regarding the role of higher education institutions in the development of GC, this concept has been used in association with that of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) to refer to the context of internationalization of higher education (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021) as both an agent and a consequence of globalization.

As has been argued by Ortiz-Rojo et al. (in press) and elsewhere, the concepts (GC and GCE) are plagued with controversies such as the one put forward by Banerjee, Shaw and Sparke (2023) after the Covid19 pandemic in relation to the possibility of GCE to include and address problems of social exclusion, disenfranchisement and sub-citizenship. Another criticism raised against these terms by Piccin and Finardi (2019) is that they mask national/local responsibility in the guarantee of ‘universal’ rights such as the delivery of education (Piccin & Finardi, 2019).

The concept of internationalization of higher education has also been criticized for promoting and benefitting more the Global North (see for example, Abba, Leal, & Finardi, 2022, Vavrus & Pekol, 2015). Moreover, this process has been interrogated for its colonial legacies (see for example Chiappa & Finardi, 2021) that promote and reproduce the invisibility of the Global South (Finardi, França, & Guimarães, 2022, 2023).

Notwithstanding the criticism raised against these concepts, it is possible to see an increased interest in how Higher Education Institutions (HEI) develop internationalization (e.g. Knight & De Wit, 2018) even with critical perspectives (e.g. Bamberger & Morris, 2023), as well as how they can foster GC (Ortiz-Rojo et al., in press; Schattle, 2010; Oxley & Morris, 2013; Aktas et al., 2017; Pashby et al., 2020; Massaro, 2022) in relation to GCE (Piccin & Finardi, 2019, Guimarães & Finardi, 2021).

Nevertheless and according to Lilley et al. (2015), universities that claim to promote GC and GCE rarely show evidence of how they actually accomplish those objectives. So as to partially fill in that gap, Ortiz-Rojo et al. (in press), set out to investigate how universities from the Global North/South approached GC. Their study was carried out in ten universities located in eight different countries, six in the Global North and four in the Global South, two of which also participated in the study reported here (the university in Switzerland and one of the universities in Brazil) about the role of Virtual Exchange in the development of GC. Overall results of Ortiz-Rojo et al. (in press) study showed that the concept of GC was associated with that of internationalization of higher education (IHE) and student mobility which in turn reflects discourses and practices proposed, practiced and benefitting mostly students from the Global North.

Another study that informs and somehow motivated the present one is that of Finardi and Asik (2024) who set out to investigate the potential of virtual exchange (VE) to promote the development of internationalization at home (IaH) (Note 1) reporting on the GAZUFES project carried out between one of the institutions in Brazil that participated in the BRASUIS project and another one in Turkey.

Results of the analysis of Finardi and Asik (2024) suggest that the GAZUFES project made a significant contribution to English Language Teaching (ELT) education and IaH in the two universities involved, not least by raising the awareness of the international offices in the two institutions about the potential of VE for IaH approaches. Notwithstanding the potential and impact of the GAZUFES project reported by Finardi and Asik (2024) and just like the BRASUIS project described in the present study, the GAZUFES project was a teacher-led initiative in the institutions involved in Brazil and Turkey suggesting more effort is needed to institutionalize VE projects beyond individual teachers' efforts in those contexts.

So as to advance the discussion afforded by Ortiz-Rojo (in press) about the role of universities in GC with insights from the universities in Brazil and in Switzerland and also to advance insights of Finardi and Asik (2024) reporting on the GAZUFES project, filling in the gap identified by Lilley et al. (2015), the present study presents evidence of how three universities (two in Brazil and one in Switzerland) attempt to develop GC and Internationalization at Home (IaH) through a Collaborative Online International Learning COIL/Virtual Exchange (VE) (Note 2) project.

As suggested by Ortiz-Rojo et al. (in press), most of the strategies and approaches used towards GC are linked to notions of internationalization of higher education (IHE) translated into strategies such as academic mobility (Killick, 2012), both physical and in the form of virtual exchange (Finardi & Asik, 2024, Guimarães & Finardi, 2017; Guimarães & Finardi, 2021, Helm, Baroni, & Acconcia, 2023, Mendes & Finardi, 2023, Wimpenny et al., 2022) and Internationalization at Home (IaH) (Harrison, 2015, Ortiz-Rojo & Finardi, 2022, Guimarães et al., 2019).

As also mentioned in Finardi and Asik (2024), VE also known as telecollaboration (Helm, 2013) or COIL (Wimpenny et al., 2022) is an umbrella term (O'Dowd, 2021) used to refer to pedagogical practices that involve a variety of online communities and activities with the potential to promote global citizenship education (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021; Finardi & Ortiz, 2022) raising the awareness of the role of universities in the internationalization and education of citizens to address global and local problems.

Yet and before the disruption caused by the Covid19 pandemic, the process of internationalization of higher education was usually understood and practiced as a synonym to academic mobility despite criticism raised by Knight (2011) and De Wit (2017) that this represented both a myth and a misconception, respectively.

As previously mentioned, just as GC and GCE, the concept of internationalization of higher education has been criticized on the grounds that it was proposed and benefits mostly individuals and universities in the North (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015). Considering results of Finardi and Asik (2024) about the role of VE in IaH, results of Ortiz-Rojo et al. (in press) about the role of universities in promoting GC, the criticism raised by Vavrus and Pekol (2015) that internationalization of higher education benefits mostly the North and the one put forward by Lilley et al. (2015) that universities promoting GC fall short in showing evidence of how they try to accomplish this objective, the present study contributes

with evidence of how three universities, one in the Global North (Switzerland) and two in Global South (Brazil) are fostering GC and IaH through VE projects.

Yet and before we go any further, it is important to make a caveat at this point. Drawing on Dados and Connell (2012), the term Global North is used here to refer to central regions whereas Global South refers to low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized regions. Though we acknowledge that these terms (Global North/South) are problematic and geopolitical rather than geographical, for the sake of this study and following Ortiz-Rojo et al. (in press) and Finardi and Asik (2024), they will be used here in reference to the three universities involved in the BRASUIS project, two located in Brazil (Global South) and the other in Switzerland (Global North). Notwithstanding this caveat, it is important to say that though we acknowledge other issues involved in power relations such as size and type of institution, age, origin, gender, sexual orientation of participants, for the sake of this study we are using the terms Global North/South in relation to the geographical position of the institutions involved in the BRASUIS project as a more thorough discussion of those other dimensions is outside the scope of this paper.

Having said that and considering the panorama laid out so far, this study reports on the BRASUIS virtual exchange project carried out between three universities (two in Brazil and another in Switzerland) to illustrate and foreground the discussion of the possibilities of VE to develop GC and IaH. In so doing, we contribute with evidence of how universities of the Global South/North foster GC and IaH through VE. So as to pursue that aim, the BRASUIS project will be described in the next section before delving into the analysis and discussion of the data collected from reflection reports and observations.

2. Method

The aim of this study is to analyse the potential of VE to develop GC and IaH. With that aim, the study reports on the BRASUIS Virtual Exchange Project carried out in two universities in Brazil and another one in Switzerland involving 26 students and eight international scholars as guest speakers. The project included both synchronous and asynchronous exchanges carried out during a period of 14 weeks. The methodology employed to analyse the impact of the BRASUIS project on the institution's IaH and GC approach is qualitative, using content analysis to look at data from reflection reports and observations produced by the project participants and lecturers. In what follows, a brief description of the context where the BRASUIS project was developed will be described.

2.1 Context

2.1.1 Brazilian Universities (BU)

BU1

The first Brazilian University (BU1) is the same one that participated in Ortiz-Rojo et al. (in press) and Finardi and Asik (2024) studies. BU1 is part of the federal network of universities and by Brazilian standards is considered a medium-sized public university with slightly over 20,000 undergraduate and

4,000 graduate students, 1,700 faculty members, and almost 2,000 staff. BU1 has been trying to internationalize following inductive internationalization calls and programs launched by the Brazilian government such as Science without Borders, English without Borders and more recently the Capes PrInt (for more information about this university and these programs see Amorim & Finardi, 2017, Finardi & Archanjo, 2018, Ortiz-Rojo & Finardi, 2023a, 2023b, Guimarães & Finardi, 2023). It has also attempted to offer VE projects before, during and after the pandemic as one of the strategies to internationalize (see for example Guimarães, Hildeblando Junior and Finardi, 2022) though, as suggested by Finardi and Asik (2024), most of these initiatives are teacher-led and not institutionalized.

BU2

As a multi-campus and multi-regional institution, the second Brazilian university (BU2) is one of Brazil's largest public universities. It comprises 31 departments and 26 campuses spread across the state it serves and is home to a community of over 30,000 students, staff, and faculty members. Founded in 1983 by integrating existing colleges, particularly Teacher Education Colleges, BU2 was created with the mission, shared by most state universities in Brazil, to address social inequalities in the regions by providing culturally responsive education and promoting the expansion of public and tuition-free undergraduate and graduate education inland. Additionally, BU2 has been at the forefront of implementing affirmative action policies by reserving spots for minority students from low-income backgrounds in the public education system. It offers over 170 undergraduate and graduate courses in both in-person and distance/online education modalities. There has been significant growth in the number of academic courses (master's and doctoral programs) in recent years, promoting the expansion of graduate education outside the largest cities. Internationalization is still incipient, teacher-led, and focused on student mobility as the institution has started crafting an internalisation policy (2024).

2.1.2 Swiss University (SU)

SU is a medium-sized and one of nine public Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences with around 7,800 students enrolled in 38 bachelor's and 48 master's degree programs. As public funds finance all public universities in Switzerland, its tuition fees are accordingly low when compared to private institutions in Switzerland. In addition to teaching, SU core competencies include continuing education, research and development as well as consulting services. SU comprises seven departments situated in various German-speaking and one bilingual-speaking (German-French) location. Most of the programs are taught in German, while others are offered both in French and German or in English. An increasing number of courses or modules within these programs are held in English and are internationally accredited. With its Global Engagement Office – its center for international affairs – SU ensures its participation in international education programs, supporting the departments in implementing internationalization and promoting staff and student mobility. SU is an associated partner of PIONEER Alliance (association of Universities in the E.U.) and houses (in partnership with six African and five European institutions of higher education) the UNESCO Chair in Higher Education, Research and Innovation in Responsible Global Management.

2.2 *The BRASUIS Project*

The BRASUIS VE project was informally baptized ‘*Guaraná com Chocolate*’ because of the link between this popular soft drink (Guaraná) and luxury food (Swiss Chocolate) with the countries involved in the VE. Brazil is famous for its guaraná and though Switzerland is best known for its chocolate, the cocoa, used to produce chocolate, comes from Brazil, more specifically from the state of Bahia where one of the Brazilian institutions of the BRASUIS project is located. The fact that the main ingredient used to produce Swiss chocolate comes from Brazil and other countries from the Global South is thought-provoking from a decolonial perspective. The first meeting and launching of the project was carried out partially in a hybrid format with students from BU1 in the same room, connected online with the participants from Bahia (BU2) and from Switzerland (SU1), who were also in the same room in their respective institutions. On that occasion, the Swiss professor brought ‘guaraná’ for the Swiss students to drink and the Brazilian professor brought Swiss chocolate for the Brazilians to taste. The idea was to use that moment (the only one in which students would be physically together in the same room) to introduce the project, a taste of the other country and also an excuse to discuss where guaraná and chocolate come from, enabling a physical and sensory experience in the launching of the virtual exchange project.

As previously mentioned, the BRASUIS project involved 26 students (14 from Brazil and 12 from Switzerland) who engaged in asynchronous and synchronous activities during 14 weeks between September and December 2023 with 10 synchronous meetings (plenaries and autonomous meetings). The plenary meetings consisted of a mini-lecture delivered by an invited speaker and they served as input for the pairs (one student from Brazil and another from Switzerland) to discuss during their autonomous meetings and were held in English as a lingua franca (ELF). Students were required to produce weekly reflective reports, build up a glossary, learn some phrases in their partner's language (mostly Portuguese and German) besides improving their skills in ELF, and present a video and their highlights of the meetings in the last plenary meeting. All plenaries were in English though participants eventually spoke sentences and provided examples in the language they learned from their peers.

BU1 offered the course as an elective course for graduate students and an optional activity for the English language teaching (ELT) Practicum course, who engaged on a voluntary basis. BU2 offered the course as an optional learning trail to the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course and students engaged voluntarily. SU offered the course as part of its university-wide, interdisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary optional program for all graduate and post-graduate students.

All participants registered to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to access the schedule, and materials, and post their activities, questions, and comments. The VE was designed as a learning-centered experience based on language tandem pairs/groups working autonomously to address predefined tasks and activities using English as a lingua franca with the possibility of learning other languages (Portuguese and German) using approaches such as the intercomprehension approach (e.g. Finardi, 2019) that refers to the possibility of speakers of different languages using their knowledge and

own languages to understand languages they have not specifically learned. As such, the intercomprehension approach leverages mutual intelligibility among languages and speakers to facilitate communication and comprehension without necessarily achieving fluency in the target language. In the BRASUIS project participants were expected to understand each other and learn ‘some’ language as a result of engaging in the project, not necessarily to learn the other language (Portuguese and German) fluently or even to use English as a lingua franca with advanced levels of proficiency since the requirement to join the project was to have an intermediate level of English as this was the language that supported the intercomprehension approach used.

The teaching activities and tasks were designed to encourage exchange and cooperation and foster intercultural dialogue considering the topics addressed in the mini-lectures, such as multilingualism, translanguaging, globalization, internationalization, trans- and intercultural experiences in professional and private life.

The VLE was conceptualized as a friendly, inclusive, and safe space to reduce (possible) fear of contact and language anxiety (in terms of language skills, speaking in public or with people from other cultures) fostering a learning environment that enables openness, authenticity, autonomy, and collaboration for concrete self-selected learning outcomes.

As previously mentioned, the objectives of the project were to develop GC by expanding intercultural and transcultural communication skills through the contact with different cultures and languages interacting in some of them using strategies such as translanguaging and intercomprehension approaches. Moreover, considering the number of students who can travel abroad and/or engage in international exchanges and/or academic physical mobility, the project aimed at developing Global Citizenships (GC) and Internationalization at Home (IaH) through virtual exchange in the institutions and communities involved.

The rationale for the design of the tasks considered the trans- and intercultural competencies required for global citizens taking into account diversity, inclusion, and equity to foster global citizenship and sustainable responsibility for our planet. By the end of the project, participants were expected to develop the following skills: Work in an autonomous way engaging in international and mixed-language groups; initiate and maintain interactions virtually; work on transdisciplinary issues involving language and GC skills for negotiation within their groups; communicate efficiently and purposefully with people in different languages and time zones; deal with conflicts that emerge from diverse cultural backgrounds respectfully; use their language skills and knowledge to understand others in international settings in a reflective and goal-oriented way to develop GC. Also, as a result of the project, it was expected that the institutions involved would develop more sustainable IaH approaches, especially after the lessons learned after the pandemic with the interruption of physical mobility and the carbon footprints associated with international travel and physical academic mobility.

2.3 Participants

The BRASUIS project involved 34 participants: Twenty-six graduate and undergraduate students, twelve from SU and fourteen from BU 1 and 2, considering two exchange students in BU1; three professors (BU1, BU2, and SU); 2. two teaching assistants; and three lecturers/guest speakers from SU: one professor and Head of Bilingualism & Multilingualism Office, one professor and Head International Relations Office , and one Practitioner from the Business world (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants of BRASUIS project

Type of group	Brazilian Universities (BU)	Swiss University (SU)
Graduate and undergraduate students	14	12
Professors	2	1
Assistants	1	1
Invited speakers	0	3

Source: Authors'

2.4 Data Collection

Based on a qualitative research design, the study employed a range of data collection techniques and tools such as participant observation, focal group discussion among professors and assistants, and reflective reports by participants to produce content analysis. Considering qualitative research methodology, data from participants was collected through purposive sampling reflective reports and other productions for in-depth insights into the experience (Yin, 2016).

2.5 Data Analysis

Considering content analysis, the following steps were taken:

1. Definition of research question and objectives: What themes and attitudes towards language and culture emerged in the VE? How were these themes addressed? Which attitude shifts could be identified? What are the affordances of the VE project to IaH and GC in the institutions/communities involved?
2. Selection of content sample: we analysed the reports and exchanges produced during the meetings and in the reflective reports.
3. Developing coding scheme: the set of categories used to classify the content for analysis was based on three categories: attitudes and feelings towards language; attitudes and feelings towards interculturality; and attitudes and feelings towards stereotypes.
4. Coding the content: Keywords related to feelings and attitudes were highlighted during exploratory and analytical readings.
5. Analysis and interpretation of data: Presented in the next sections.

3. Results

The analysis of the reflective reports and observations made in researchers' diaries during the BRASUIS project suggests an initial concern regarding language use and accuracy, particularly from the part of the Brazilian students, most of whom are pre-service teachers of English. This finding may be related to a normative view on language use rooted in beliefs associated with colonial legacies and nativespeakerism as reported in Archanjo, Barahona and Finardi (2019), Simoneli and Finardi (2020) and Bonilla-Medina and Finardi (2022).

It is possible to observe a tendency to regard variation as deviation in this view. What was sought in the project was the opposite, that is, an openness towards intercultural aspects related to day-to-day life such as daily routines, food, languages, transportation, educational systems, living conditions, economy, etc; an awareness and curiosity to address the stereotypes, as proposed by the syllabus, as well as recognizing the lack of knowledge of cultures, particularly from the part of Brazilian participants towards Switzerland and its multilingualism (Finardi, 2017).

The initial shared concern could be mapped through the following keywords related to feelings and attitudes, particularly in the first reports: shame, fear, uncertainty, and nervousness were the prevalent feelings expressed. These feelings and attitudes were also observed in the synchronous meetings: cameras and microphones off; low interaction via chat. However, as the meetings and reports progressed, the feelings and attitudes shifted towards comfort, confidence, curiosity, and, also, joy, in a movement of deconstructing the understanding of language previously reported and reconstructing a new understanding, an intercomprehension aligned to the principles of global citizens that celebrated multilingualism with the use of translanguaging and intercomprehension approaches. In this sense, English as a lingua franca was taken as a bridge (rather than a wall) and a means of sharing experience, life, highlighting the role played by languages in creating practices for a GC and an education for peace.

Regarding the stereotypes, students revealed awareness in openness to recognize their lack of knowledge of the Other (see for example Simoneli & Finardi, 2020), as well as critical thinking when reflecting on the role played by stereotypes in hindering recognition and understanding among languages, cultures, and people. The keywords in general pointed out a lack of knowledge about the topics addressed, the understanding of stereotypes and barriers as well as the feelings of amazement and awe in the face of their discoveries and the recognition of similarities. Some stereotypes about Brazil give away the deeply rooted imaginary produced by coloniality that portrays Brazilians as having an excess of holidays (untrue, when compared to other countries) or not strict/early routines (for waking and working, for instance). Also, the autonomous meeting in pairs constituted a safe space to address these topics and to produce interactions to affirm or deconstruct first impressions and stereotypes such as Swiss students being more serious and less engaged in interactions and Brazilian students being too open or too friendly.

Regarding the potential of the BRASUIS VE project to develop GC and IaH in the institutions and communities involved, it is possible to say, based on observations made in the researchers' diaries, that:

1. Though the Swiss institution was more advanced than the Brazilian ones in terms of GC development as can be seen in its certificate of Global Competence, also reported in Ortiz-Rojo et al. (in press), the integration of the VE project with the Brazilian institutions afforded unique opportunities for all involved to develop their GC and IaH further;
2. Though the Swiss institution was more advanced than the Brazilian ones in terms of IaH approaches as can be seen in its inclusion of the VE in the formal curriculum, all institutions were able to integrate the BRASUIS project in their formal and informal curriculum infusing values associated with GC in all;
3. Though the most important objective of the project was to develop intercultural skills, all participants were able to develop more than that. They developed (inter)language skills required for GC and education for peace, as well as for forming and maintaining friendships.
4. Though the BRASUIS project was a teacher-led initiative in all institutions involved, it was formally and informally integrated in the curricula with possibilities to institutionalize as an IaH strategy.

4. Discussion

The impact of BRASUIS VE on the institutions involved varies significantly. University SU has implemented practices to support Internationalization at Home (IaH) with pedagogical, financial, and administrative backing. In contrast, the Brazilian universities BU 1 and BU 2 show different levels of institutionalization and internationalization.

BU 1 already has an internationalization policy in place, providing some support and recognition for VE/COIL practices. Although teacher-led, BU1 has built expertise on VE/COIL practices with significant production on the theme. On the other hand, BU 2 is in the process of developing an internationalization policy. The BRASUIS project was not only a teacher-led initiative but also an informal one, with no institutional support, validation or integration in the curriculum being restricted to pre-service teachers enrolled in EFL classes in the English Language Teacher Education course, taught by the professor of BU2. Professor of BU 2, as a post-doctoral fellow supervised by the professor at BU 1, was invited to take part in the project due to the academic and professional connections with the professor at BU 1. Thus, it can be said that though the Brazilian universities are lagging behind the Swiss university (in terms of GC, IaH and integration of VE), the BRASUIS project afforded the development of GC and IaH in those institutions as a result of the engagement in the project.

These disparities in institutionalization highlight not only global North-South differences (also reported in Ortiz-Rojo et al., in press) but also regional disparities within Brazil. They also underscore the roles played by Federal and State institutions, as well as disparities in resources and funding.

Taken together results of this study suggest that the BRASUIS VE project leveraged and was a relevant

contribution and strategy to develop GC and IaH in the institutions involved, especially in what concerns the Brazilian ones. Moreover, VE projects such as the one reported on here, had the bonus of affording the deconstruction of stereotypes, developing (inter)language skills required for (inter)comprehension in a world so needy of it.

Finally, VE projects involving partners from the Global North/South have the potential to also reduce distances (physical, virtual and mindsets) by bringing partners from both parts of the world together in international dialogues. In a world plagued by wars and lack of dialogue, this is no little contribution!

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Notes

Note 1. IaH can be understood as an approach which aims to internationalize the home institution without resorting to outbound academic mobility or mobility abroad.

Note 2. Though the terms COIL/VE are known as synonyms, for the sake of this study we'll adopt the term VE which is broader than COIL that usually involves only two classes, one in each country.

Note 3. All public institutions in Brazil are tuition-free.