

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# International Virtual Exchange During and Beyond the Pandemic

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### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic may have put a temporary halt to the study abroad ambitions of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Honors College students in 2020 and 2021, but a positive dimension emerged from the lockdown. Working from our homes provided faculty and students with an unprecedented opportunity to explore the potential for virtual international exchanges in partnerships that would outlast the lockdown. I believe that a great movement in international education started in 2020, and in this chapter, I share details of an experience of virtual global exchange between IUPUI and the University of Rwanda in Central Africa's Great Lakes Region that uses the learning management software called CourseNetworking (CN). A CN license is not required to take advantage of the

CN's international networking features and is available free of charge to individual users across the globe. Given the outstanding success of the IUPUI-Rwanda exchange, our university's honors college plans to extend its offering of virtual exchange classes utilizing the CN to other international settings.

## OVERVIEW

There has been considerable work related to international study in the world of honors education (Mulvaney and Klein; Klein and Mulvaney) and on the potential of virtual exchange to promote global learning (Commander et al.; Duke; Rubin and Guth). In this chapter, I describe a creative new approach to cooperative international education that links honors students with their peers around the globe.

In fall 2020, I co-taught a virtual exchange class for the IUPUI Honors College with Professor Michel Ndahimana, my colleague from the University of Rwanda. The class included twenty-three IUPUI honors students from multiple disciplines and twenty marketing students from the University of Rwanda. The students united, virtually, in a class focused on learning about each other and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The platform for this connection was a new technology called Course Networking or CN ([thecn.com](http://thecn.com)), which is a novel learning management system (LMS) developed at the IUPUI Cyberlab. Its many features, like badges, translation, video recording, and e-portfolio, were ideally suited to virtual exchange and are discussed in detail.

The first goal of this chapter is to describe the virtual class. The second is to demonstrate just how easy such exchanges are when using technology such as the CN, which is like Facebook for academia. This software, plus the use of What's App for free mobile calling, allowed students from both countries to get to know one another and explore course topics well beyond what can be delivered in a classroom setting. Finally, I will share information on the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals and some of the impressive discoveries made by the students in their respective home countries.

I designed this course so others could replicate it. The U.N.'s Sustainability Agenda 2030 stresses that students need to become not just global citizens but also sustainability citizens by acquiring the

knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, including a culture of peace and equality within and between nations. (See [sdgs.un.org/2030agenda](https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda).) In terms of learning outcomes, the U.N. Agenda and the IUPUI dimensions of global learning guided our activities. In particular, students were required to

- Analyze their own beliefs, values, and communication styles in respect to those of another culture;
- Practice intercultural communication;
- Demonstrate understanding of the workings of other nations and cultures; and
- Apply learning from this virtual experience in their home settings.

## **LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

The class emphasized two major dimensions. The first involved the students getting to know each other, with a strong emphasis on culture, identity, and current affairs. The students were paired with one or two others, but they also connected with other class members through the CN. Our lofty goal was to make the students feel like they were actually visiting Rwanda or the U.S.A. While living and learning in a global setting beyond one's comfort zone or general familiarity are the ideal of study abroad, the vast majority of IUPUI's students will not have the benefit of such an experience because of a range of factors. The CN, with its high-activity social media page, provides the opportunity for virtual travel for all, and it greatly assisted the students in at least partially reaching the ideal.

During the 'get to know you' phase of the class, the students shared amazing things about where they live and what makes their home special or unique. For Rwandan students, the modern-day miracle of a post-genocide Rwanda was a topic of great interest. Kigali is now the safest and cleanest capital city on the African continent. Students also made posts on famous tourist attractions like the gorillas in Volcano National Park, or on how Rwanda is using robots that walk and talk to monitor COVID-19 patients in the larger cities. The IUPUI students were astounded by these revelations.

Indiana students, by contrast, shared stories about the fraught U.S. political situation, and also about their favorite holidays, like Halloween and Christmas; their favorite restaurants and foods; and things that they would do together when their partner came for a real visit, like visiting the world-famous Indianapolis Children’s Museum or the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, which hosts nearly half a million visitors during the Indy 500 car race.

## **UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

While this cultural learning was happening, the students were also becoming familiar with the U.N.’s 2030 agenda for global transformation encapsulated by the “5 Ps” (People, Planet, Peace, Prosperity, and Partnership) and covering all interrelated topics including ending poverty and hunger, providing access to fresh water, and seeking justice and equality. Adopted by all U.N. member states in 2015, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a call to action for all—rich and poor—to promote prosperity while protecting the needs of future generations. (See [sdgs.un.org](https://sdgs.un.org).) They replaced the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that focused on lifting developing countries out of poverty. (See [un.org/millenniumgoals](https://un.org/millenniumgoals).) The SDGs also focus on transforming the unsustainable lifestyles of industrialized countries. While all the Rwandan students had previous knowledge of the SDGs, few of the U.S. students were aware of this global initiative, so there was some catching up to do.

Working in binational teams, the students asked how the U.S. and Rwanda were responding to this global call to action. This assignment required students to investigate the SDGs and to ask serious questions about the rate of progress, if any, as identified in the voluntary annual reports produced by both nations. Students were asked a second question at the start of the course: How can their specific disciplines or majors—whether business and marketing or the arts and sciences—be engaged in the struggle to achieve the SDGs? As the students worked through all seventeen goals, they quickly recognized just how interconnected they all were. In order to make a difference in the specific area of their expertise required the resolution of challenges in other seemingly unrelated areas.

Universities play a critical role in meeting the SDGs through teaching, interdisciplinary research, the creation of evidence-based knowledge, measuring and evaluation, and advocacy. We need to inculcate this idea of working together across national borders and the disciplines to meet the challenge, and there were some very lively discussions on our course website on the various goals, including SDG 5 on Gender Equality. This goal states that all men and women need to be treated equally and have the same rights and opportunities despite their biological differences. Rwanda is a world leader in gender equality. Over 60% of Rwandan government members are women. By contrast, just over 20% of the Indiana legislature are women, and the same is true for the U.S. Congress. As one IUPUI student wrote:

I have learned so much through this course. I never knew about the seventeen sustainable development goals prior to this course. It was very eye-opening learning about these and what each country has done to improve. I learned how Rwanda is doing better than the U.S. when it comes to SDG 5 on gender equality. Rwanda pays women during their maternal leave, which I found was really interesting because the US does not do that. For the final project, my group decided to choose SDG 5 on gender equality. I found a great template for us to use and we assigned each other a topic to talk about. We gave feedback on each other's information. We also exchanged thoughts about poster looks and ideas. We finally agreed on a color scheme. I inserted picture icons that went with all of our topics.

For IUPUI students, many were shocked to learn that Indiana has one of the U.S.'s worst rates of gender pay inequality, with a 37% difference in pay for similar jobs between men and women. Many American students assumed that Indiana must be on track with SDG 5, and this brought home the message that work on the sustainable development goals must begin at home.

## **ENCOURAGING STUDENT PARTICIPATION**

The course was conducted entirely on the Facebook-like CN course page, and students were free to post and reflect at their leisure across

the time zones. There were weekly individual assignments and one major end-of-term project where, in small groups, the students created posters on the SDGs from the perspective of their majors and their home countries. In what manner could a marketing major contribute to the SDGs in their career? In what manner could a neuroscientist or an engineering or kinesiology major do the same?

Apart from the poster, all assessment came from individual postings on the dedicated CN site. Students were awarded a certain number of points for each post. The minimum passing grade was 250 points, and the CN kept track of participation. If a student was falling behind, then we could intervene. The Rwanda instructor and I also awarded the most active participants with incentive badges, such as the Best Participant badge, Great Post badge, or Critical Thinker badge. Badges are part of the CN, but in this instance, the CN technicians created these new badges for this class. At the end of the course, if students had accumulated the necessary points and satisfactorily completed the group poster assignment, they received a certificate of completion. IUPUI students also received course credit. The badges and certificates were automatically added to their CN e-Portfolios.

Communications between faculty and students and between students were mostly asynchronous, but students were also in direct communication with their international partners through free services like WhatsApp or FaceTime. We also had regular monthly Zoom meetings to provide updates and encouragement. In one meeting, we introduced Ali Jafari, the inventor of the CN, as well as the senior management from both universities. The goal, in this instance, was to explore the potential of expanding such virtual exchanges to other units within the University of Rwanda. Glowing student reports on their experiences in the online class were center stage. A small sample of student comments to each other drawn from the course site reveals just how deep an impact even virtual travel can have:

- Thank you for sharpening my academic skills and helping me become a better student. Not only have I learned a lot about the SDGs, I have also learned about Rwanda's beautiful country and their culture. Rwanda is full of amazing wildlife and gorgeous scenery. Their national parks are outstanding. I also got to know about Rwandan

culture through the posts on CN. I also learned about some of their history. Rwanda is promoting a green country.

- Rwanda's capital, Kigali, has a car free day every month where they kick the cars off the streets. This car free day is so fascinating and environment friendly, something America would never be able to do.
- This was a great experience for all of us even though it was online. This course was amazing and enjoyable. It was truly an eye opening experience. I have full intentions of visiting Rwanda one day.
- Thank you for this experience! I've enjoyed it, and I've enjoyed getting to know you all! I've learned so many different and interesting things, and I'm better for the experience!! I look forward to visiting Indiana!

## **OVERCOMING CHALLENGES**

We have all faced unprecedented challenges because of COVID-19. Even under the best of circumstances, organizing virtual exchange courses can be a trying experience. There are time zones to negotiate, technology and connectivity issues, language barriers, and cultural differences. I have taught virtual classes before in Macedonia, Iran, Russia, and the Gaza Strip, and I am quite familiar with potential roadblocks; however, the pandemic exacerbated our concerns. While IUPUI started the semester on time in a hybrid format—some classes were live and some were online—the University of Rwanda semester was delayed by several months.

Students who signed up for the class in Rwanda were working from home where internet connectivity was much weaker than on their campus. When at their university, the Rwandan students had the benefit of live peer encounters to keep them on track with their assignments. Working in isolation at home was often much more difficult. Given the delay at the start of their semester, Rwandan students were undertaking this class even before the university was officially open. Many excelled, however, especially with the added encouragement of the regular Zoom meetings and the Facebook or WhatsApp calls they had with their U.S. peers.

The major prerequisite for success for this class was definitely the close relationship between the co-teachers. Together, Professor Nhadimana and I tracked student progress very closely, and we remained flexible so that we could make last-minute changes to the syllabus to accommodate unanticipated issues that arose. We maintained our rapport through regularly scheduled emails and Zoom calls and by taking a keen interest in learning more about each other's work, home environments, and what makes each other tick.

## **CONCLUSION**

The most challenging aspect of establishing this virtual exchange class was finding an international partner. IUPUI has a Memorandum of Intent with the University of Rwanda that spells out the many ways in which our universities can collaborate. In addition, all 30,000 students and faculty at IUPUI have access to the CN, as do all 25,000 students and faculty at the University of Rwanda, so there is no reason why many more students cannot undertake a similar global learning experience.

When considering the subject area and interests of the students, faculty members interested in starting a virtual exchange course should look at the lists of current university partners for their home institutions and then reach out to them through the international office. As I mentioned earlier, the CN license is not required to take advantage of the CN network features. For individual users, both faculty and students anywhere in the world, the CN is accessible and free or available with more advanced options for a low fee. Perhaps the CN can entice colleagues in the same field of specialization or professors who teach in general education or communication studies and are interested in forming international connections.

The biggest takeaway for me from this course was how much the students gained from the virtual experience. The feedback was uniformly of a high order, but more than that, there was an emerging sense of global consciousness and a feeling that we were all in this together. The words of one of the IUPUI participants sums up many of our feelings about the success of the class:



This Virtual Study Abroad opportunity between IUPUI and the University of Rwanda has been most insightful. During the course of this semester, the world battled a pandemic and despite the stressors of COVID-19, our two universities were able to successfully communicate. This experience challenged my expectations and previous misconceptions about Rwanda, and Africa at large. Not only did I learn about Rwanda, but I also learned about the U.S. I am not from Indianapolis, and my peers have taught me much about the city. Even though I have lived in Indiana most of my life, my experiences are different from other Hoosiers. The reality that I can be so different from my classmates and peers even though we are from the same culture begged questions about other cultures. If I am different from those who live near me, why should I expect all Rwandans to be the same? If stereotypes do not apply to me, why should I think that stereotypes would apply to my classmates in Rwanda? By participating in this class, I have learned about another culture and further engaged in intercultural communication, while at the same time taking a deep dive into the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals and what it takes to make the world a better place for us all.

We face different challenges resulting from diverse historical circumstances, but we can learn from one another in negotiating the current world crisis and meet the goals set by the United Nations. As the end of the pandemic approaches, the IUPUI Honors College is now committed to continuing to offer its students the opportunity to engage in international virtual exchange courses in additional settings. The benefits of participation in terms of the aforementioned IUPUI dimensions of global learning are considerable, especially given the easy access to technologies like the CN. For those who are unable to undertake a physical journey overseas, the virtual experience can provide deep insight into other cultures and contribute significantly to one's understanding of the world at large.

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