

# Promoting Student Learning through Transatlantic Conversations



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## Abstract

This presentation provides insight into student experiences and growth through two virtual, synchronous, 7-week courses with students/faculty from Indiana University Indianapolis (IUI) in the United States and the University of Warsaw (UW) in Poland. Our fall 2023 exchange focused on accessibility challenges within the two countries, with discussions on environmental, cultural, legal, and political affairs surrounding accessibility. Our spring 2024 course engaged students in discourse regarding diversity and cultural competency in these countries. The goal was to immerse students in intercultural collaborations to stimulate empathy, respect, and understanding of critical issues through the lens of others. Students' understanding of globalization and cultural competency was measured through surveys to gauge the impact of transatlantic conversations.

## Introduction

Global learning is making its way into undergraduate courses, often as virtual global exchange. This exchange can be defined as a web-based international collaboration between undergraduate students from two different universities (Collins et al., 2022). These are increasingly popular for a variety of reasons, primarily the low cost of a virtual interaction compared to study abroad programs (O'Dowd, 2021). While an estimated 10% of students are financially or otherwise able to participate in a study abroad, virtual exchanges provide accessibility to a wider range of undergraduate students (Case et al., 2022).

A benefit of a virtual exchange is improved cultural competence. Defined as "the ability to collaborate effectively with individuals from different cultures" (Nair et al., 2019), cultural competence speaks to collaboration amongst a diverse cohort of individuals. This collaboration leads to further benefits in education, career development, and research, prompting students to consider and integrate a global perspective in each of these areas (O'Dowd, 2021).

For health-focused students, engaging in a virtual exchange provides an opportunity to explore and discuss different health delivery mechanisms, based on often contrasting views or political approaches to healthcare. Because the U.S. has a complex mechanism of both private (i.e., employer-based) and public (i.e., Medicare/Medicaid) insurance programs, students are often intrigued by the way other countries approach healthcare and how those differences impact individuals. Health professionals need to consider perspectives from different regions and cultures (Collins et al., 2022) as healthcare professionals often have a diverse patient population.

To provide quality care to patients of different cultures, backgrounds, and ethnicities, exposing healthcare students to a global education early in their collegiate career is beneficial. Bothara et al. (2021) found that conducting a virtual exchange focusing on differences in healthcare delivery underscores the impact of culture on health outcomes. Virtual exchanges also contribute to engagement and learning, allowing students to apply previously learned knowledge outside of a classroom setting (Case et al., 2022). This integration of course material was found to increase retention among students (O'Dowd, 2021). As virtual exchanges provide a more hands-on approach via dialogues and projects, students find virtual exchanges more interesting, and are thus more inclined to be involved in their education (Aquino et al., 2023).

## Acknowledgements

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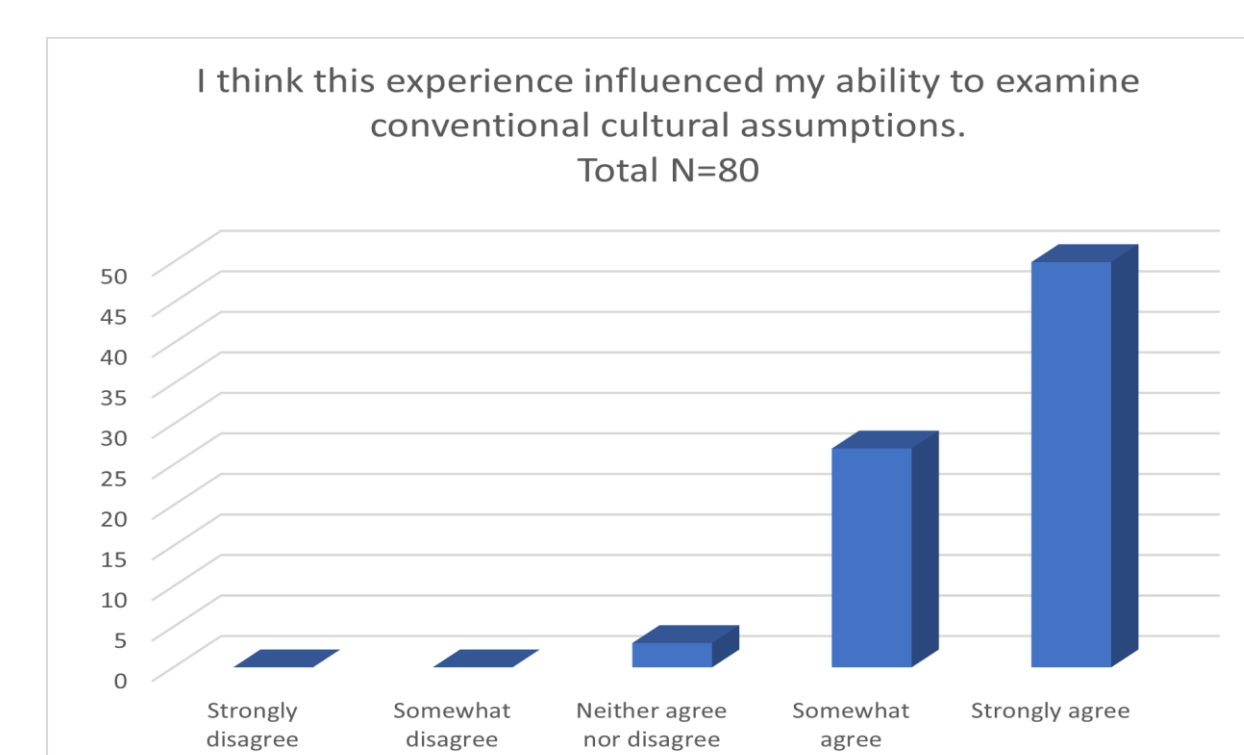
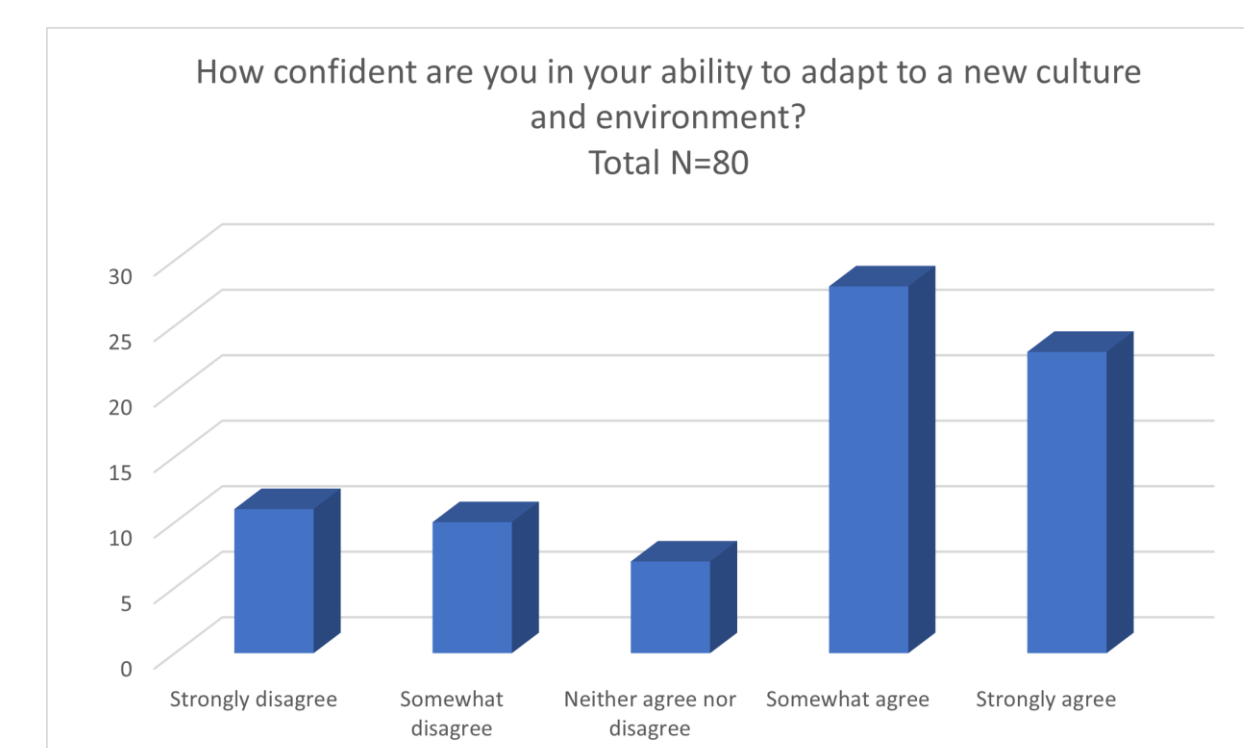
## Methods

We offered two courses for the 2023-24 academic year. Each course included 6-8 classes with an instructor and students from both UW and IUI. The IUI instructors remained the same, while the UW had two separate instructors. As facilitator, the IU Europe Gateway established the connection between IUI and the Polish partner institution and supported the two courses leading up to and throughout the fall and spring terms.

Enrollment for fall included 10 U.S. students and 15 Polish students while the spring course included 43 U.S. students and 28 Polish students. Students in the 2023 fall course ranged in age between 18-20, with most of them first-year students who elected to participate in the course. For the spring 2024 course, 33 students were first-year students with the remainder spread among second- and fifth-year students; all U.S. students were required to interact in the course as part of their degree program while the Polish students elected to take the course.

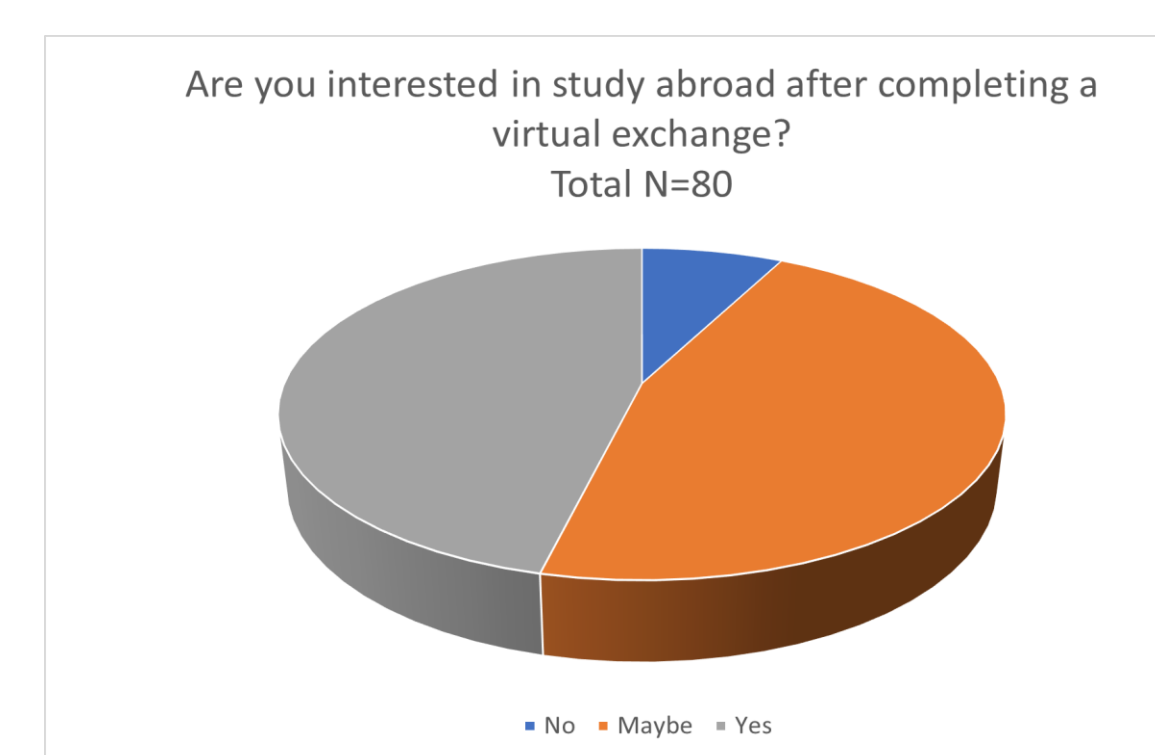
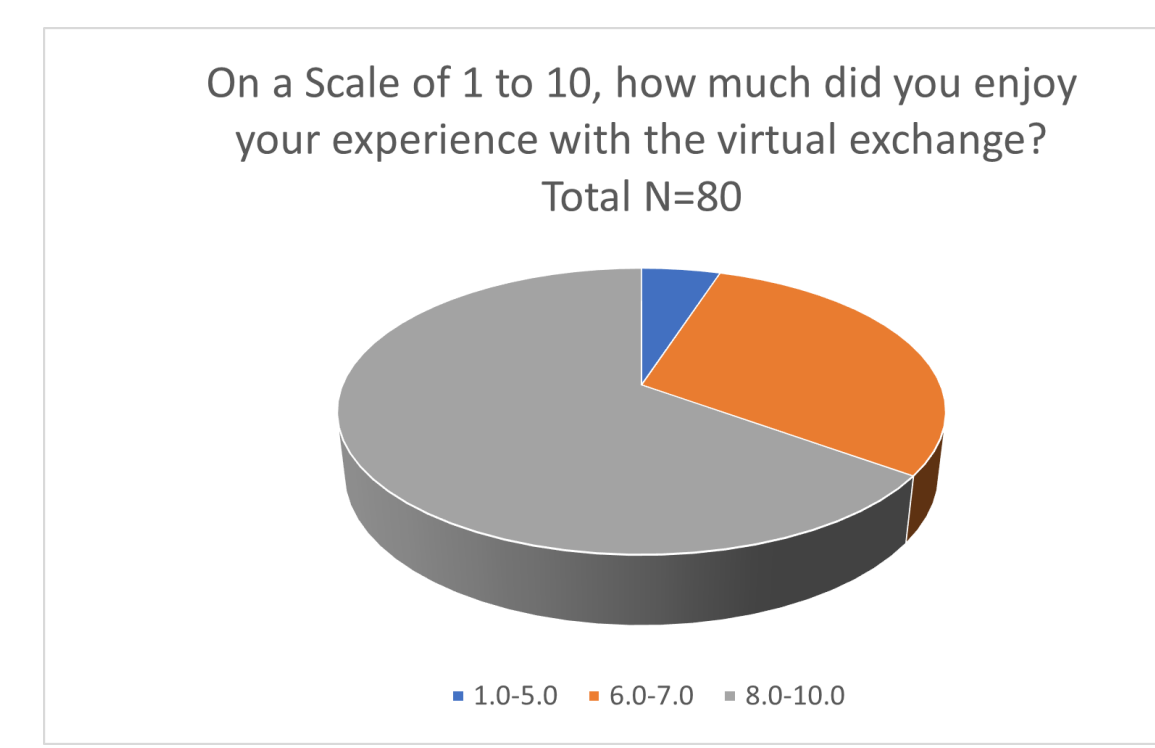
Students completed a post-survey asking them about their confidence in adapting to a new culture, impact on cultural assumptions, and improving cultural competency. Students were further asked to reflect on their comfort level with the virtual exchange, their enjoyment of the experience, and whether the virtual exchange spurred their interest in completing a study abroad. All students were awarded a certificate of participation, and IUI students also earned course credits.

## Results



Of the 96 students, 80 responded to the post-survey:

- 51 students agreed that the virtual exchange improved their confidence in adapting to a new culture (top left).
- 77 respondents agreed that the experience helped them examine cultural assumptions (bottom left).
- Students were asked to rate the virtual exchange experience on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being "little to no enjoyment" and 10 being "great enjoyment" (top right). Four students rated their enjoyment low, between a 1 and 5; 24 students rated the experience between a 6 and 7; while 52 students rated the experience between 8 and 10. Interestingly, while 29 students chose "extremely comfortable" when asked about engaging in the exchange, 44 respondents replied they were "somewhat" comfortable.
- Students were split as to whether the virtual exchange increased their desire to participate in a study abroad, with half the respondents saying "maybe" and the other half saying "yes" (bottom right).



## Discussion

While brief, the surveys provided a glimpse into student satisfaction with the virtual exchange and their cultural competency. Comments provided along with the Likert scales indicated the students overall felt the exchanges improved their cultural awareness and understanding. Remarks focused on aspects such as gaining a broader understanding of foreign culture and healthcare, exploring the differences between the United States and Poland, viewing health issues in a new way, and having an opportunity to converse and collaborate with students from another country.

Students were often quite nervous when starting the virtual exchange, not knowing what to expect or how to act, as the question "how comfortable were you" indicated. Although we, as instructors, emphasized that the Polish students spoke English and were eager to participate, there seemed to be anxiety about studying with foreign students. This was alleviated in some respects by utilizing breakout rooms effectively. In the fall 2023 course, we only used breakout rooms to facilitate group work. However, based on feedback, we changed this for the spring course, using breakout rooms in every session, changing the makeup of students in breakout rooms each time, and allowing students time to simply chat with peers. We continued to use breakout rooms for group work also, but feedback indicated this additional time to "meet and greet" helped with student comfort.

## Future Direction

One aspect to address for future exchanges is the assessment process itself. While we used Likert Scales to ask students about cultural competency, these were all self-rated. Moving forward, we would like to use a validated scale to explore cultural competency, as this is a critical skill needed in healthcare.

An example might be the Inventory for Assessing the Process of Cultural Competence among Health Professionals-Revised (IAPCC-R). This scale includes 5 subscales exploring cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill, cultural encounter, and cultural desire.

Another validated tool is the California Brief Multicultural Competence Scale (CBMCS), which has 4 subscales (multicultural knowledge, awareness of cultural barriers, sensitivity to consumers, and sociocultural diversities). Our next virtual exchange is being developed with the University of Brighton in the United Kingdom, with students from a healthcare-focused degree, who would also benefit from an inventory on cultural competence.

Using these types of tools, along with a session providing students with a toolkit to better navigate intercultural encounters, would provide better insight into the value of the cultural exchange for health-focused collegiate students.



## Conclusion

Our initial foray into virtual exchanges was to offer our students an opportunity to engage in a "study abroad" without the financial barriers that excluded many of our students. In developing our virtual exchanges, we found the benefits far exceeded the initial goal. In offering these virtual exchanges, students were able to:

- Interact with peers from different cultural backgrounds, helping them to explore health beliefs, practices, and systems. This solidified the information from our required course in diversity issues, which focuses heavily on cultural competence in healthcare.
- Learn about health issues in other countries, thereby broadening their understanding of global health and potentially preparing them for future international work.
- Compare our healthcare delivery system to another country, exploring policies, regulations, and practices leading to health outcomes.
- Work collaboratively across international boundaries, allowing input from two cultures, and promoting a global approach to solutions.
- Network with students in another country offering benefits for future collaborations or potential job opportunities. The opportunity to interact with foreign students enriched the learning environment and added a unique depth to conversations.
- Use digital tools to promote exchange and collaboration. By including pedagogical tools to improve collaboration, students were exposed to new applications that are useful in today's digital workplace.

Overall, the virtual exchanges for our health-focused students allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of health issues and outcomes within the global lens of different cultures and geographic locations.

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